The New Criterion

March 1998

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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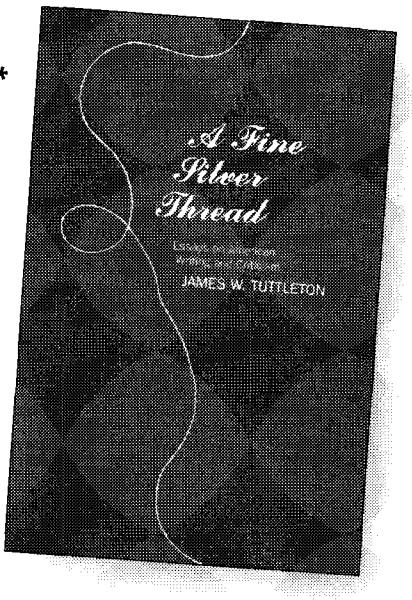

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Notes & Comments: March 1998

Stanford's stairways to nowhere

As many of our readers will remember, back in the late 1980s Jesse Jackson led a group of about five hundred students on a march at Stanford University. Organized to protest the university's mandatory course in Western civilization, the march instantly earned a permanent place in the annals of academic fatuousness because of its chant: "Hey hey, ho ho, Western culture's got to go." It has taken Stanford a while, but we believe they may finally have realized Rev. Jackson's dream. It did not happen all at once, of course. First, in response to pressure from Rev. Jackson and his radical supporters, the faculty senate voted thirty-nine to four to abandon the required course in Western civilization in favor of something called "Culture, Ideas, Values" ("CIV" as in "civilization," but without the offending adjective "Western"). This turned out to be a politically correct multicultural smorgasbord that featured such edifying items as "Forging Revolutionary Selves," "Multicultural Selves in the Navaho Country," "Our Bodies, Our Sheep, Our Cosmos, Ourselves," and "Labor, Gender, and Self in the Philippine Uplands."

Substituting such PC tidbits for the works of dead white guys like Plato, Dante, and Shakespeare was admittedly a good start in the war against Western culture. But although Stanford's ostentatious display of political correctness was welcomed by academic radicals, it also sparked widespread criticism in the media. Many parents and commentators still found it hard to swallow the idea that an elite university should be quite so eager to jettison the riches of the Western tradition in favor of a thoroughly politicized syllabus. It didn't help when a dean at Stanford opined in an op-ed piece in *The Wall Street Journal* that the writings of Frantz Fanon, a black advocate of revolutionary violence, might "get us closer to the answer we need" on questions of social justice than the writings of John Locke, one of the greatest philosophical influences on the Constitution of the United States.

On balance, then, Stanford's initial attempts to give Jesse Jackson and his chanting marchers what they wanted must be judged only partially successful. Lately, however, the people running Stanford seem to have become a good deal subtler in their efforts to destroy the intellectual integrity of the university. Instead of blatantly capitulating to the demands of student radicals marching up and down the campus, university administrators have figured out that it is much easier to destroy the humanities from within. By the simple expedient of setting up lavish new programs ostensibly devoted to the arts and humanities, and then importing high-profile enemies of those disciplines, Stanford can have it both ways: it can *seem*

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to be championing the humanities (good for alumni relations) while actually doing everything it can to undermine them.

We learned about this brilliant gambit when a friend sent us the January 20 issue of *The Stanford Daily*, a student newspaper, in which the new "Presidential Lectures and Symposia in the Humanities and Arts" were announced. The lecture series, along with twelve million dollars for four new professorships in the humanities and arts, has already attracted as participants such fashionable luminaries as the Chilean novelist Isabel Allende; the doyen of so-called African-American studies at Harvard, Henry Louis Gates, Jr.; the deconstructionist architect Peter Eisenman; the philosopher Jacques Derrida; and the artist Christo (who has lately come billed with his wife, Jeanne-Claude).

According to *The Stanford Daily*, the academic and cultural celebrities invited to participate in the new symposia will typically spend three days on campus. They will deliver a lecture, participate in panel discussions, and have dinner with Gerhard Casper, Stanford's president, and other guests, "during which they will discuss the role of the humanities and arts in higher education." President Casper is quoted as saying that the symposia and lectures are meant to transform the humanities into "a more visible and dynamic participant in shaping, enriching, and challenging the intellectual agenda across the University." Right. But what sorts of shaping, enriching, and challenging of the intellectual agenda can we expect from those participating in this academic road show? Hans Gumbrecht, a professor of French and Italian who is also director of the series, solemnly informed readers of the student paper that campus visits made by the above-named luminaries "are meant to leave traces." Those up on recent academic lingo will recognize that "traces" is a bit of deconstructionist jargon: books and other communications no longer have meaning; on the contrary, they leave "traces" that cut against or undermine the very possibility of meaning. But don't take our word for it. Here is Derrida himself:

> A *thought* of the trace, of differance [*sic*] or of reserve, having arrived at these limits and repeating them ceaselessly, must also point beyond the field of the *epistémè*. Outside of the economic and strategic reference to the name that Heidegger justifies himself in giving to an analogous but not identical transgression of all philosophemes, *thought* is here for me a perfectly neutral name, the blank part of the text, the necessarily indeterminate index of a future epoch of differance. *In a certain sense, "thought" means nothing.*

In a certain sense? Ah yes: precisely in the sense that Derrida and his deconstructionist allies do everything they can to scramble thought with their skeins of impenetrable linguistic nihilism. What we can expect from Stanford's latest folly is not any productive "shaping, enriching, and challenging" of the intellectual agenda but a further assault against the basic premises that inform and nourish the arts and humanities. Professor Gumbrecht was quite explicit about this. The traditional "legitimations" for the humanities, he complained, are no longer convincing. Moreover, "we humanists have not come up with any alternative and convincing explanations for what [we're] doing." Of course, one might wonder what a gentleman who is so much at a loss about the purpose of the humanities is doing teaching them at Stanford University. And one might wonder, too, why Stanford should entrust an expensive new program in the humanities to a man who is unable to convince even himself that they are valuable.

But perhaps all is not lost. Professor Gumbrecht brightened at the thought that Christo might "do a project on campus or the architect Eisenman's visit will inspire a new building in his style." Frankly, we hope he is right. A follower of Derrida, Peter

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Eisenman specializes in buildings that deliberately confound their occupants: stairways that lead nowhere; columns scattered promiscuously in the middle of living and dining rooms in order, Mr. Eisenman has explained, to "intrude on" and "disrupt" the "living and dining experience." It would be fitting, we think, if President Casper, Professor Gumbrecht, and Jacques Derrida could be made to occupy a new building designed by Peter Eisenman. Of course, Mr. Eisenman, too, should be required to occupy the building. And as for Christo: he has earned worldwide notoriety for wrapping large public buildings and monuments in cloth. He once wrapped the Reichstag, for example, and a bridge in Paris. What he does is a species of publicity stunt, not art, but no matter. Why not take it a step further and engage in a little transgressive, self-referential wrapping? When Mr. Eisenman designs his interrogatory building for Stanford, he should be sure to set aside a room for Christo. Then Christo can step inside and order that they all be wrapped up together. Here, at last, would be a real contribution to "shaping, enriching, and challenging" the intellectual agenda at Stanford.

The decline of "Civilization"

It was always something of a mystery to us as to why the Library of Congress in Washington should sponsor a magazine of such obvious intellectual nullity as the absurdly named *Civilization*. To judge from its contents, the very title of this journal seemed to derive less from anything resembling real thought about the current condition of our civilization than from a once-popular television series produced by the BBC in London. To say that the Library of Congress version of *Civilization* treated the entire realm of culture and the arts with a remorseless superficiality would be to understate the case. For what *Civilization* packaged for its hapless readers was little more than a glossy print version of a not very bright television talk show about culture. The most compelling issues in contemporary cultural life were guaranteed to remain off-limits. What any of this breezy chatter had to do with the functions of the Library of Congress was anyone's guess. To us, anyway, it always looked like a crass attempt to exploit the intellectual prestige of the Library of Congress for sub-intellectual commercial purposes.

But, as is often the case these days, it is always worse than you think. For *Civilization* has now openly annexed itself to the culture of celebrity by inviting a series of "guest" editors to take charge of the magazine's editorial content. The first of these celebrity-editors is the movie director Martin Scorsese, who is responsible for the February/March issue. Future guest editors are said to include Paloma Picasso, Julia Child, Vaclav Havel, and Vartan Gregorian. What such names have in common is not, of course, any discernible standard of critical judgment. What they have in common is the culture of celebrity. This, apparently, is what now constitutes civilization at the Library of Congress. Shame! Shame!

Correction

Our apologies to Philippe de Montebello—and to our readers—for misstating the terms of Mr. de Montebello's new duties at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in our Notes & Comments section for February 1998. Basing our Note on a misleading news story in *The New York Times* of January 15, we mistakenly reported that in naming Mr. de Montebello to the new position of chief executive officer at the museum, the Met's board of trustees had retired the office of "director." In fact, Mr. de Montebello retains the title of director while also assuming the duties of the museum's chief executive officer. We promise not to rely on *The New York Times* in such matters in the future.

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Reflections on a cultural revolution: VII

The politics of delegitimation

by Roger Kimball

We must recognize that justice is a higher social goal than law and order.
—William Sloane Coffin, Jr., 1972

To be radical is habitually *to do things which society at large despises.*
—Daniel Berrigan, S.J., 1968

We shall be told . . . that actions which bring damnation to the worldling may be inculpable in the children of light. We must be prepared for strange alternations of rigorism and antinomianism as our history unfolds.
—Ronald Knox, *Enthusiasm*

In "Man's Second Disobedience" (1989), an essay about radicalism and the French Revolution, the English philosopher Roger Scruton observed that "the decisive feature of the revolutionary credo . . . is its provision of a criterion of legitimacy that no actual institution can ever pass." Note that there are two sides to this credo. One side—the smiling side—involves the seductive lullaby of perfectionism. Here we have a beguiling mixture of utopian dreams, elevating rhetoric, and ideals as simple (and often as simple-minded) as they are abstract. Proposing an impossible criterion of legitimacy, one is able to indulge in credulousness as a deliberate policy, undistracted by any contact with the less edifying realities of human nature. The other, more dour side of the revolutionary credo is the militant hangover from these intoxications: smug, righteous, peremptory, alternating wildly between the ecstasies of absolute self-regard and the implacable condemnation of the status quo.

In periods of brute political upheaval, this combination of toxins is deadly. The French Revolution, honing its guillotines with a rhetoric of virtue derived from Rousseau, dramatized this as surely as have the many grisly efforts to instantiate the tenets of Marxism, Fascism, and other utopian schemes in the course of this unhappy century. The Polish philosopher Leszek Kolakowski summed it up neatly in his essay "The Death of Utopia Reconsidered" (1983): "Utopians, once they attempt to convert their visions into practical proposals, come up with the most malignant project ever devised: they want to institutionalize fraternity, which is the surest way to totalitarian despotism."

Of course, this utopian impulse expresses itself differently in a liberal democracy. When tumbrels and firing squads are unavailable, the upheaval tends to be primarily cultural or moral. But the element of confused fanaticism remains: a despotic subtext beneath the progressive rhetoric. The legal scholar Alexander Bickel was undoubtedly correct when he wrote, in 1970, that "to be a revolutionary in a society like ours, is to be a totalitarian, or not to know what one is doing." Or, he might have added, both. One of the most prominent features of America's cultural revolution was the sudden ap-

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pearance in the mid Sixties of utopian agitation where prudent affirmation and common sense once reigned.

The great catalyst for this development was without doubt the Vietnam conflict. Almost overnight, it seemed, the entire climate of elite opinion in the country underwent a startling metamorphosis. The ostensible issue was U.S. involvement in Vietnam. But it soon became clear that Vietnam was merely the occasion for disruptions and demands that went far beyond any specific government policy. Vietnam became the banner under which the entire range of radical sentiment congregated. It provided a rallying point, a crusade large enough to submerge all manner of ideological differences. As the Sixties evolved, it became increasingly clear that what was at stake was not only the war. The real issue was our way of life: what used to be called without apology "the American way of life," with its social and political institutions, its moral assumptions, its unspoken confidences about what mattered. One measure of the change is the fact that even now, thirty or more years on, it is nearly impossible for anyone with a college education to speak of "the American way of life" without irony. To a large extent, that is because it is now practically taken for granted that going to college involves not so much the "questioning" as the repudiation of traditional moral and political values. (Or to put it another way: the academic "questioning" or "interrogation" of traditional values has only one right answer, "No.") The greater the exposure to higher education, the more thorough the repudiation is likely to be.

Not that such repudiations are confined to the academy. Far from it. It is part of the air we breathe: implicit as much in our degraded pop culture as it is in our assumptions about our responsibilities as citizens and moral agents. One of the most profound effects of America's cultural revolution has been to institutionalize the assumption of institutional illegitimacy. It is less a matter of cynicism than a rejection of established authority, as if the very fact of being established undermined the legitimacy of an idea or institution.

There are many facets to this phenomenon. One of the most curious concerns the role of certain religious figures who, in the mid Sixties and Seventies, brandished the phrase "civil disobedience" as a patent of moral rectitude. It began with the Civil Rights movement, when various religious leaders participated in marches and demonstrations to end racial segregation. The nobility of that cause imbued the idea of civil disobedience with an aura of supreme moral urgency. Whether, even then, civil disobedience—i.e., illegal though (generally) nonviolent agitation—was justified was a question that could hardly be raised. The rightness of the cause made this question seem impertinent at best. Besides, there was the warm glow of self-satisfaction that attended participation in such activities. Increasingly, "civil disobedience" came to imply, at least to its advocates, obedience to a higher authority—the authority of one's conscience, first of all, but construed in such a way as to suggest the gratifying thought that the dictates of one's conscience were indistinguishable from the dictates of justice itself.

Those addicted to the pleasures of moral superiority found it an irresistible brew. By the time that Vietnam became an issue, civil disobedience had established itself as a prescription for moral intoxication, not to say anesthesia. Sanctioning illegality as an expression of higher virtue, the ethic of civil disobedience promised to transport its partisans to the ranks of a moral elect even as it undermined the authority of the law and its supporting institutions and beliefs. Never mind the contradictions that this situation bred: opportunities for moral megalomania were too precious to squander. Among the many individuals responsible for proselytizing the ethic of civil disobedience as a form of higher virtuousness, three deserve special mention in these reflections: William Sloane Coffin, Jr., chaplain at Yale University during a crucial period in the Sixties and

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Seventies; and the Berrigan brothers, Daniel and Philip, Catholic priests whose names became synonymous with the antinomian uproar of Sixties radicalism. Wrapping themselves in the mantle of a religious authority that, in one way or another, they repudiated by their actions, Rev. Coffin and the Berrigan brothers made an enormous effort to legitimize the politics of delegitimation. In this sense, they epitomized one prominent side of America's cultural revolution; members of the establishment, they nevertheless embraced a political program dedicated to the destruction of the establishment.

Born in 1924 to a prominent New York WASP family, William Sloane Coffin, Jr., grew up in a privileged world of servants, penthouse apartments, summer houses, and expensive schools. He served in the army in World War II and matriculated at Yale after the war, "shamelessly bypass[ing] the Yale admissions office," he explains in his memoir, *Once to Every Man* (1977), "accepting the offer of Henri Peyre, the chairman of Yale's French department, that he accompany me on a visit to Dean De Vane." In the late 1940s, his fluency in Russian caught the notice of the newly formed Central Intelligence Agency. He had agreed to a two-year stint in the CIA when a lecture by Reinhold Niebuhr intervened and he decided instead to enroll in Union Theological Seminary, where he committed himself to "as much of God as I believed in." When the Korean War broke out in the summer of 1950, he left the seminary and joined the CIA, working as an operative in Germany until 1953. Looking back from the late 1970s, Coffin was clearly a bit embarrassed by his earlier, patriotic self. "National security," he comments, "is not a very important consideration in the Bible—not as compared to national righteousness and world security." Perhaps fortunately, he doesn't attempt to give chapter and verse for that conviction.

In the following years, Coffin completed his education at Yale Divinity School, worked as a chaplain at Andover and Williams College, and, in 1958, returned to Yale as chaplain. By the early 1960s, he was very active in the Civil Rights movement and was (as he puts it in a chapter title from his memoir) "Moving Toward Civil Disobedience"—toward a species of political activism he later described as "a form of moral jiu-jitsu." Gradually, he emerged as a national figure. And as he gained in prominence, he more and more cast himself in the self-dramatizing role of the man of conscience battling the world's injustices. "If we are to serve our country with our consciences," he wrote in a lecture delivered in 1972, "we must recognize that what is most important is not what the law requires but what justice demands."

As it turned out, Coffin was seldom in doubt about what justice demanded. When Vietnam hotted up, it demanded that he aid and abet young men in burning their draft cards, that he participate in marches on the Pentagon, and that he travel to Hanoi courtesy of the North Vietnamese government (where he promptly discovered "a very special feeling for the North Vietnamese, a feeling I attributed to the fact that we were friends because we had deliberately refused to become enemies"). In 1970, when Bobby Seale and eight other Black Panthers were on trial for murder in New Haven and it looked for a moment as if New Haven would erupt in a riot, justice demanded that William Sloane Coffin publicly declare in a sermon that the Panthers should go free because their trial was "legally right but morally wrong." Concluding that the situation was "prerevolutionary," he urged the Yale community to engage in nonviolent protests and acts of civil disobedience. "To those who say 'what if this were a Klansman on trial and his fellow Klansmen were threatening destruction?'" Coffin wrote, "I can only answer that, while releasing a Klansman would be increasing the power of the oppressor, the releasing of the defendants in this case would mean the sharing of power with the oppressed."

The New York Times, which was a very

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different sort of paper in 1970 than it has since become, editorialized that, by delivering this sermon, Coffin had done

> his best to guarantee moral confusion among his student followers. Mr. Coffin said that even if Mr. Seale were to be found guilty as charged, the entire nation stands accused of bringing him to the state of mind in which the alleged crime might have been committed. This is a legally and morally wrong and dangerous concept, even when supposedly elevated to the level of theological doctrine.

The truth is that by the early 1970s, Coffin was dazzled by his sense of himself as a representative of what he described in one lecture as "the universal conscience of mankind." Acts of civil disobedience that dramatized the conflict between Coffin's own morality and the requirements of the law were his preferred means of exhibiting the workings of that conscience.

For Coffin and those who emulated him, it was the work of a moment to distinguish between what was "legally right but morally wrong." But as Morris I. Liebman noted in a debate with Coffin about civil disobedience, "in democratic societies any violation of the law is an uncivil act. This is true notwithstanding the motives of the violator." Indeed, there is a sense, Liebman remarked, in which "civil disobedience" is a misnomer, since its activities, by breaking the law, are by definition uncivil. Like most advocates of civil disobedience, Coffin was quick to cite the example of Henry David Thoreau. But Liebman is right to point out that Thoreau, who was essentially an anarchist, not a democrat, provides an unedifying precedent. Everyone remembers Thoreau's remark: "That government is best which governs least." It is less often recalled that he went on to say that "'that government is best which governs not at all;' and when men are prepared for it, that will be the kind of government they will have." As Liebman observed dryly, "the day that men are so prepared will be the day that men are angels."

Similarly, Coffin's appeal to the "rule of conscience" turns out to be a rule whose content is determined by William Sloane Coffin and his like-minded friends. "The advocates of civil disobedience," Liebman points out, "insist upon license which they would not permit to their opponents. The police, it seems, are to arrest members of the Ku Klux Klan, but not members of the Weathermen. Laws may be violated if, and only if, one is a member of the elite."

Coffin was hardly alone in seeing himself as part of a moral vanguard whose prerogatives included breaking the law when "the rule of conscience" said it was OK. Indeed, this form of self-infatuation was a defining characteristic of the new generation of radicals that populated America's cultural revolution. For example, the left-wing historian Howard Zinn once blithely informed his readers that civil disobedience should be allowed for programs of "liberal" but not "reactionary" reform. And who was to decide what counted as suitably "liberal"? Why, Mr. Zinn, of course. (The Marxist philosopher Herbert Marcuse, in a statement quoted in an earlier installment of these reflections, put this extraordinary idea in perhaps its baldest form: "Liberating tolerance," Marcuse wrote, "would mean intolerance against movements from the Right, and toleration of movements from the Left.")

William Sloane Coffin, acting from his position as Civil Rights leader, chaplain of Yale University, and member in good standing of the American WASP aristocracy, did a great deal to legitimize this form of illegitimacy and illegality. His example helped to convince a generation that the law was dispensable when it conflicted with duly ratified liberal sentiments. That these sentiments should seem to be invested with the authority of religion made them all the more appealing to anyone seeking to enhance his sense of moral election. Of course, Coffin was not the only cleric to avail himself of this opportunity for self-aggrandizement. Of those who invoked religious prin-

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ciples in conducting this assault on legality and civil order, there were none more notorious than Daniel and Philip Berrigan. Indeed, when it came to the sentimental blending of religious rhetoric and radical activism, the Berrigans had few equals.

In background, the Berrigans could not have been more different from Coffin. He hailed from the genteel ranks of New York society; the Berrigans came from a poor Irish Catholic family that settled, finally, in Syracuse. Their father was a scrappy, depressive railroad man and farmer: a fount of bitter labor-union sentiment, bad poetry, and temper tantrums. Their mother was a devout and long-suffering women who held the family of six boys together. Philip, the youngest, was born in 1923. Like four of his five elder brothers, he was bluff, athletic, and robust. Daniel, born in 1921, was delicate, with weak eyes and weak ankles—"a species of house boy" as his father contemptuously put it.

Daniel entered a Jesuit seminary near Poughkeepsie in 1939 when he was eighteen and was ordained in 1952. Philip, who fought with distinction in France and Germany during the war (an achievement he later disdained), entered a seminary of the Society of Saint Joseph—an order founded in the nineteenth century to help blacks—in 1950. (A third Berrigan son, Jerry, also entered the seminary but left before being ordained.) Although both of the younger Berrigans have written books, Daniel is by far the more literary. Like his father, he has produced prodigious quantities of bad poetry; unlike his father, he has managed to get reams of it published and even praised. (In *Disarmed and Dangerous*, a joint hagiography of Daniel and Philip by Murray Polner and Jim O'Grady that appeared last year, we are told that Daniel "had become a holy man, perhaps even a prophet, . . . to be admired, read, and reread fifty and one hundred years from now.")

Daniel's radicalization began on two trips to France and Eastern Europe after his ordination. He affected the dress and hauteur of French worker priests and came to regard persecution as a prerequisite of seriousness. In 1964, recalling with relish the hardships faced by religion in the Marxist countries he visited, he wrote that the churches there "are small but purified by persecution. . . . The Christians under Marxism have returned to their pre-Constantinian situation of being poor, pure, and persecuted, and they are leading the life which I believe God has decreed for the Church . . . what a great feeling, to be in a country where there's no head of state going to church every Sunday and corrupting it!"

For Philip, political awakening came mostly from witnessing racial discrimination in the South. He was consumed by the injustices he saw around him. About both brothers there was a strong current of what Francine du Plessix Gray, in an admiring profile published in 1970, rightly called "moral fundamentalism"—an evil thing in conservatives, of course, but laudable indeed in political radicals eager to engage in histrionic gestures to declare their solidarity. Daniel summed up the attitude frankly in 1968: "one had to go to jail. It was an irreplaceable need, a gift not to be refused."

It was a gift they have both been treated to frequently, especially Philip. The Berrigans' great moment was in the 1960s and early 1970s. For them, as for so many others, the Vietnam conflict sharpened their radicalism and provided an overarching cause that seemed to explain all manner of evil in American society. As Daniel put it in the preface to *Night Flight to Hanoi* (1968), "the American ghetto and the Hanoi 'operation' were a single enterprise—a total war in both cases." (Yes, he, too, went to Hanoi—accompanied by Howard Zinn—courtesy of the North Vietnamese government. From about 1965 to the early Seventies, Hanoi was a prized pilgrimage spot for starry-eyed American radicals from Tom Hayden and Jane Fonda to Mary McCarthy and Susan Sontag: they all felt, as Hayden put it, that "here we begin to understand the possibilities for a socialism of the heart.")

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The Berrigans' favorite pastime was to raid draft boards and destroy A1 files by pouring blood on them or setting them afire after dousing them with homemade napalm. In October 1967, Philip led a raid on the draft board offices at the Baltimore Customs House. In May 1968, he, Daniel, and seven others made their most notorious raid, on the draft board at Cantonsville, Maryland. They snatched hundreds of files from the hands of startled clerks, spirited them out to the parking lot, and burned them while singing the Lord's Prayer for the benefit of the news media that had been carefully tipped off about the event beforehand.

Such conjunctions of illegality and smug religiosity was a Berrigan speciality. Writing about the Cantonsville raid in *Night Flight to Hanoi*, Daniel offered this rationale, half mocking, half maudlin, and entirely self-righteous:

> Our apologies, good friend, for the fracture of good order, the burning of paper instead of children, the angering of orderlies in the front parlor of the charnel house. We could not, so help us God, do otherwise. For we are sick at heart, our hearts give us no rest for thinking of the Land of the Burning Children. And for thinking of that other Child, of whom the poet Luke speaks.

(The *poet* Luke? Well, this was 1968.) Asked later whether he had given any consideration to the feelings of the draft board clerks, Daniel snapped that "anyone who works for the draft board deserves no more consideration than the guards at Belsen and Dachau."

The Berrigans were eventually sentenced to jail. Daniel first became a fugitive from justice for several months—an action that only enhanced his status as a counter-cultural hero—before finally serving his sentence. While in jail, we are told, he was able to catch up on the latest volumes of Che Guevara, Herbert Marcuse, Régis Debray, and other edifying revolutionary authors.

It is difficult to say what is more repulsive about the Berrigans: their sanctimoniousness or their naïveté. Both qualities are on prominent view in *Night Flight to Hanoi*. The book has two main themes: the unspeakable evil of the United States, and the great nobility of the North Vietnamese. The two are woven together with an unbreakable thread of self-satisfaction. Early on in the book, Daniel acquaints us with his idea of "the biography of the white Westerner. He requires (1) someone to kill for him and (2) someone to die for him. His power is such that he can arrange both requirements, that of vicarious executioner and of vicarious corpse." Meeting some U.S. embassy officials in Laos, he and Zinn "see what 'foreign service' does to human faces. Dead souls. They fix their gaze on the middle distance and announce the utter impossibility of all suggestions." But getting to Hanoi was worth any number of cantankerous civil servants, even American ones. "It was," Berrigan tells us, "like stepping out upon the threshold of a new planet, and then reporting back to those whose lives and history and future had wedded them to earth. . . . It was as though . . . a new creation was in its first stages. History being woven by a people who refused to die."

The purpose of the trip was to receive, as a gesture of goodwill from the Hanoi government, three captured American pilots (whom Berrigan later described as having been brainwashed . . . by the American military). It is when the pilots are herded before him by their captors that the pap really starts flowing. "I was struck," Berrigan writes, "by the thought, How well they look, how ruddy, how clean cut, how unkillably American."

> They seemed eager and nervy and somewhat overanxious to please. They declared without prompting that they were well fed and cared for and grateful to the North Vietnamese military for the kindness with which they had been treated. . . . They said they had been given news of the war regularly, that they had visited Hanoi during Christmastime, that they had had a Christmas celebration "with a tree

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in that corner there," that their Christmas dinner had consisted of turkey and rice, that they had even received a kind of gift package at that time.

And one recalls that George Bernard Shaw, visiting the Soviet Union in 1931, boisterously announced that he could find no trace of famine anywhere. *Mirabile dictu!*

Both Berrigans, as of this writing, are still with us. Daniel has faded almost entirely from public notice. Philip, who secretly married a nun in 1969 and was defrocked in 1973 when he publicly announced the marriage, continues to intrude periodically through his group Plowshares. Although the Vietnam conflict is long over, Plowshares carries on, traveling around the country breaking into military installations and beating with hammers on submarines, missiles, and jet fighters. *Disarmed and Dangerous* describes a typical episode from the 1980s: "Six of them entered a building . . . and proceeded to shatter part of two Mark 12A casings (the damage was estimated at $28,000) and then dumped blood . . . onto blueprints, work orders, and assorted equipment. Then they knelt in a circle, held hands, and sang hymns." This, we are told, was "a small but stubborn challenge to ascendant Reaganism."

Even more than for William Sloane Coffin, the Berrigan brothers are men for whom calculated illegality became a patent of moral seriousness. Dazzled by the thought of their own virtue, they exempted themselves from the claims of established authority to pursue the calling of a "higher" morality. Poaching on the prestige they commanded by virtue of their status as clerics, they helped to undermine respect not only for the Church's authority but also for the authority of the various laws they broke with such regularity and insouciance. And by their example, they helped to license the spirit of casual antinomianism that has had such destructive effects on American life and culture.

Howard Zinn, in a preface he contributed to *Night Flight to Hanoi*, blithely observed that "of course [Daniel Berrigan] violated the law. But he was right. And it is the mark of enlightened citizens in a democracy that they know the difference between law and justice, between what is legal and what is right." But who is to decide what counts as enlightenment? Howard Zinn? In an earlier installment of these reflections, we had occasion to quote from George Kennan's essay "Rebels Without a Program" (1968), a scathing indictment of lawless student radicalism. Many Sixties radicals regarded civil disobedience as a form of political theater. One broke the law in as noisy a way as possible, and then one was hauled off to jail, generally for a token sentence. The willingness to endure jail was supposed to legitimize the illegality. But as Kennan notes, "the violation of law is not . . . a privilege that lies offered for sale with a given price tag, like an object in a supermarket, available to anyone who has the price and is willing to pay for it."

Kennan is an especially noteworthy critic in this context because he, too, was deeply opposed to U.S. involvement in Vietnam. But he understood, as the Coffins and Berrigans of the world do not, that in a democracy illegality is not a justifiable brand of political opposition. And he also understood that, even when one disagrees with specific policies, one's country continues to exercise a legitimate claim on one's allegiance, a claim that cannot be disposed of in a fit of self-righteous bravado. "It seems to me," Kennan writes, "that the citizen who lives under a system that assures him not only voting rights but extensive guarantees for the inviolability of his person and property, and who accepts the protection of the state in the enjoyment of these rights, owes to the state at least a high measure of respect and forbearance in those instances where he may not find himself in agreement with its policies." The alternative, as Willam Sloane Coffin and the Berrigans illustrated so graphically, is not a higher morality but the delegitimation of the institutions and attitudes that guarantee our freedom.

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Léger's modernism

by Hilton Kramer

If pictorial expression has changed, it is because modern life has necessitated it. The existence of modern creative people is much more intense and more complex than that of people in earlier centuries. The thing that is imagined is less fixed, the object exposes itself less than it did formerly. . . . The view, through the door of the railroad car or the automobile windshield, in combination with the speed, has altered the habitual look of things. . . . The compression of the modern picture, its variety, its breaking up of forms, are the result of all this.
—Fernand Léger, 1914

I once had a student who wrote a term paper in which he compared the forms in Fernand Léger's *Three Women* (1921), in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art, with the forms of the engine room of the Navy submarine in which he had served during the Korean war. While older and with more experience of the world than the other undergraduates I was then teaching, this student was new to the mysteries of modern painting. Mine was the first art-history course he had ever signed up for, and he had never before entered an art museum before I assigned the class to study certain pictures at the Museum of Modern Art—not slides or other reproductions but the actual paintings—as a preliminary to reading anything about them. His reaction to Léger was instant and electric. He seemed to understand everything about the painting, including its humor.

One of the things that was interesting about this response to Léger was its relation to the student's wartime experience. For there was no way, in that early stage of his study of modern painting, that he could have known of the role that Léger's own military experience in the First World War had played in the development of his art. About the effect of that experience on his artistic thought, Léger was nothing if not explicit and unequivocal. "During those four war years," he later recalled,

> I was abruptly thrust into a reality which was both blinding and new. When I left Paris my style was thoroughly abstract: period of pictorial liberation. Suddenly, and without any break, I found myself on a level with the whole of the French people; my new companions in the Engineer Corps were miners, navvies, workers in metal and wood. Among them I discovered the French people. At the same time I was dazzled by the breech of a 75-millimetre gun which was standing uncovered in the sunlight: the magic of light on white metal. This was enough to make me forget the abstract art of 1912–13. A complete revelation to me, both as a man and as a painter. . . . Once I got my teeth into that sort of reality I never let go of objects again.

It was not that Léger was ever inclined to glorify the violence of the war. Whatever his affinities with the Futurists in other respects, he did not share their cult of vio-

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lence. Nor, for that matter, was his conversion to a modernism based on machine forms quite as sudden, perhaps, as his later account of it implies. He had, after all, reflected on the way machine technology had "altered the look of things" in 1914, prior to his wartime encounter with "the magic of light on white metal," and the abstract paintings he produced in the *Contrast of Forms* series in 1913 had already infused the Cubist aesthetic with a machine-like dynamism quite unlike anything to be found in Picasso or Braque.

Yet what John Golding has written about the effect of the war on Léger's artistic thought—that "no other artist of his generation was to extract such positive conclusions from its squalor and horror"—is certainly true. Léger came out of the war with a clear conviction that modern technology, both as an experience to be encompassed in art and as a determinant of its pictorial form, had something important to contribute to modern painting, and it was upon that conviction that all of his subsequent achievements were based.

It wasn't quite the case, however, that in the pursuit of those achievements in the decade following the war Léger had altogether forgotten his interest in abstraction. Almost alone among the luminaries of the School of Paris in the early decades of the century, Léger understood the importance of Mondrian and the De Stijl group. In an essay on "Abstract Art" for *Cahiers d'Art*, in 1931, Léger said of these Neoplasticist painters that "they are right to say that Cubists' works cannot go as far as their own inquiries do," and hailed them as "the true purists." Abstract art, he wrote, "is the most important, the most interesting of the different plastic trends that have developed during the last twenty-five years," and predicted it would have staying power. Yet he readily acknowledged that as a painter "I have stayed at the 'edge' without ever involving myself totally in their radical concept."

Did he nonetheless derive something from their example? I think it is undeniable that he did. There would scarcely be such a preponderant use of black, white, and brightly colored geometric forms in Léger's paintings of the late Teens and early Twenties if not for the innovations of Mondrian and his circle. "They have daringly used as the 'main character' the *colored plane* which has obsessed painters since 1912," Léger wrote, adding that "the geometric shape rigorously limits it. . . . Color is locked in and must remain fixed and immobile." Even a painting as crowded with curvilinear forms as the *Three Women* contains much that answers to this description.

It is often said of Léger that, alone among the early masters of the School of Paris, it was he who took Cubism out of the studio and into the street—which is to say, into a fateful dialogue with the iconography of modernity. The nod to Futurism, just before the First World War, and the bow just after to its polar opposite—De Stijl—certainly bears this out. What he wanted for his painting was the dynamism of the former, minus its violence, and the order of the latter, minus its mysticism and metaphysics. Once Léger adopted Cubism as the key to his pictorial ambitions, moreover, he seems to have felt impelled to endow it with a more impersonal profile than would be possible in an art that drew its subjects from the intimate objects of the studio of the familiar haunts of an artists' bohemian milieu. Before the war, he solved this problem most successfully by turning away from objects altogether in favor of Cubist abstraction in the *Contrast of Forms* pictures. During the war, that was a solution that no longer commended itself to his chastened view of the place he wanted his painting to occupy in the social order to which he had been awakened by the war itself. Hence what looks like a retreat into the quasi-Futurist figurative Cubism of *The Card Game* (1916). This is not to say that the latter isn't a terrific picture, but it has the period look of the prewar avant-garde.

This is why, in the "Fernand Léger" exhibition that Carolyn Lanchner has or-

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ganized this spring at the Museum of Modern Art, our encounter with one of the first of the big postwar paintings—*The City* (1919)—has the effect of a clash of cymbals announcing a new era.[1] This is a far more original picture than is commonly acknowledged, and not the least amazing thing about it is its buoyant affirmation of modernity. The modern city that is celebrated in this painting is, however, an entirely visual rather than an existential or social phenomenon. There is no throng, no traffic, no momentum that derives from the depiction of an urban mass enacting the grueling rituals of workaday life. There is no suggestion of urban anxiety, either. In Léger's *City*, "the *colored plane*," here given an insistently vertical accent, is indeed the "main character," while what traces remain of the city's shadowy inhabitants are reduced to the status of robots or silhouettes—in other words, abstractions. For that matter, Léger's entire conception of the modern urban scene in this painting is a variety of visionary abstraction—a syncopated gloss of impressions in which the painterly dabs and touches of, say, Pissarro's city pictures of the 1890s, with their gray weather and distant vistas, are cheerfully transmuted into the close-up, immaculate, highly colored, hard-edged, fragmentary forms of a twentieth-century metropolis. It was also, of course, a largely imaginary metropolis, for the actual city of Paris in 1919 was anything but the model of modernist geometric construction that is depicted in *The City*.

In this respect, it hasn't been sufficiently noted that *The City* was a remarkably upbeat painting for an artist in Léger's position to produce at that moment in modern history, scarcely a year after the armistice that ended the First World War. The war had been an immense trauma for the men of Léger's generation, and the cause of widespread cynicism and demoralization in its aftermath. Compare the effect of the war on minds as different as Bertolt Brecht and Max Beckmann in Germany, T. S. Eliot in England, and Ernest Hemingway in America, and you might suppose, if you didn't know better, that the war had scarcely touched Léger in any adverse way. In neither *The City* nor in the pictures that Léger produced in the decade that followed—the decade in which he painted his greatest pictures—is there a hint of anything like the anguished disillusionment and cynical detachment that we find in Brecht's *In the Jungle of Cities* or Beckmann's paintings of the 1920s or Eliot's *The Waste Land* or Hemingway's *In Our Time*. Nor is there the least suggestion of the kind of angst that permeated the work of the New Objectivity movement in German painting that is exactly contemporary with Léger's paintings of the 1920s. There is instead an almost utopian vision of a technological order in which models of beauty and perfection are drawn from the world of machine-made objects.

Underlying Léger's modernism in the 1920s, then, is a certain dissociation of sensibility—for his was a modernism accompanied by a rejection, which we must suppose to be deliberate, of everything that was dark and desperate and unresolved in the experience of modernity. It was not at all the case that Léger was himself indifferent to the failings of modern society, but he seems to have reserved his feelings about all that for his politics—the politics of a sentimental leftism that eventually brought him into the orbit of the French Communist Party. In his art, however, he specialized in a kind of comic modernism, a modernism of happy endings. There is certainly a deadpan comic undercurrent in paintings like *The Mechanic* (1920), *Woman and Still Life* (1921), *Reading* (1924), and the delightful

1 "Fernand Léger" opened at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, on February 15, 1998, and remains on view through May 12. A catalogue of the exhibition, edited by Carolyn Lanchner, with essays by Ms. Lanchner, Jodi Hauptman, and Matthew Affron and contributions by Beth Handler and Kristen Erickson, has been published by the Museum of Modern Art and distributed by Harry N. Abrams (304 pages, $60; $29.95).

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Composition with Hand and Hats (1927), which obviously owes a lot to the movie comedies of the 1920s. The *Three Women* is itself—among much else, of course—a comic masterpiece.

By the 1930s and 1940s, this comic vein in Léger's paintings lost some of its deadpan humor as the pictures got bigger and their subjects more traditionally satirical. From his version of *Adam and Eve* (1935–39) to his not very amusing *Leisure, Homage to David* (1948–49), Léger becomes a more problematic artist. The element of visionary abstraction that served as a kind of pictorial conscience in Léger's masterpieces of the decade following the First World War is largely gone, supplanted by a larky pictorial vaudeville that often degenerates into mural-scale cartoons. In this connection, I think it is fair to say that Léger's interest in the movies contributed far more to his painting than his interest in modern architecture did. It was always a fallacy that modern painting would somehow achieve some sort of higher social redemption by placing itself at the service of modern architecture, and Léger—owing, no doubt to his political sentiments—was in his later years much tempted by that false prospect. In a lecture called "The Wall, the Architect, the Painter" (1933), Léger welcomed such collaboration with modern architecture. "The simplified and rational architecture that is going to conquer the world must serve as a possibility for reviving this collective art that created immortal masterpieces before the Renaissance," he said. "The evolution of society may be tending toward this new order. Easel painting survives—and will always survive—but it can be broadened by the Renaissance mural."

But the "simplified and rational architecture" that did conquer the world proved to be deeply inimical to a modernist revival of the Renaissance mural. As late as 1950, Léger was still harboring the illusion that mural painting might still be revived, and now he saw it as a vehicle for abstract painting. "I believe and I maintain," he wrote, "that abstract art is in trouble when it tries to do easel painting. But *for the mural the possibilities are unlimited*. In the coming years we will find ourselves in the presence of its achievements." He was wrong on both counts, about abstract easel painting no less than about the possibilities of abstract mural painting. The net result for his own painting, however, was to render it more and more superficial, not only in its imagery but in its command of feeling. And it wasn't as if the result succeeded with the public, either. George Heard Hamilton was surely right when he wrote that "there is little evidence that Léger's efforts to create an art with wide popular appeal has met with much response from the people for whom he intended it." Léger's modernism remained an art of the museums.

It is interesting, in this regard, to see Léger's modernism in the 1920s in relation to the turn that Picasso's modernism took in the same period. On this subject, John Golding's essay on "Léger and the Heroism of Modern Life" must be regarded as the classic text.[2] Writing about what he calls Léger's "Neo-Classicism"—a term I should myself hesitate to apply to the artist's machine-form pictures of the Twenties—Mr. Golding observes that "he avoided all the overtly classicizing attributes in which Picasso rejoiced; there are no white draperies; no garlands of leaves and flowers, and his figures wear a garb that is strictly contemporary and yet timeless in its simplicity." And further:

> The pitchers and the urns, which can transform a Picasso figure into a caryatid or a river goddess, become, in Léger's work, the implements of domestic, workaday life. The latent sensuality of Picasso's nudes, and the languor that characterizes the contemporary work of Neo-Classicizing artists such as Derain or La Fresnaye, these were qualities completely alien to Léger's art. He treats his figures, not with-

2 See "Léger and the Heroism of Modern Life," by John Golding, in *Visions of the Modern* (University of California Press, 1994).

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> out an underlying compassion, but with a detachment that was fundamental to his vision of the modern world; his figures are geared to contemporary life, and it is as part of the mechanism of life in general that they achieve significance.

Yet the similarities are found to be just as striking as the differences:

> Both adopt for their figures static, monolithic poses, and both make use of similar, heavy, generalized forms to render their limbs; the heads are composed of simple, almost geometrical shapes and the features are rendered in the same incisive, scuptural way. At times Léger's figures echo those of Picasso so closely that one cannot help suspecting him of consciously trying to inject a quality of contemporary slang into Picasso's Neo-Classical vocabulary.

Mr. Golding misses the comic element in Léger's parodies—if that is what they are—of Picasso's Neoclassicism, but he is otherwise correct about the parallels, and this raises the question of whether Léger's upbeat 1920s modernism was any less of an escape from the traumatic effects of the First World War than Picasso's fantasias on a classical dream world. In retrospect, both now seem to have been in flight from precisely the kind of ill-fated modernity that the war itself represented for an entire generation.

The exhibition that Ms. Lanchner has organized in "Fernand Léger" is not, alas, the full retrospective one had hoped it would be, but it is a splendid exhibition all the same. It is certainly odd that in an era that has witnessed the rise and fall of Pop Art and of so much machine-made Minimalist art, no New York museum thought to mount a retrospective of Léger's work as a relevant point of reference. But it may be that Léger himself, while still an undoubted classic of modern painting, no longer looms as the master artist he was once thought to be. In the absence of a full retrospective, the question remains open, but in this abridgment of Léger's *oeuvre* it looks more and more as if the Léger destined to survive is the Léger of the years 1910–1930.

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Dr. Donne & Sir Edmund Gosse

by Jeremy Bernstein

In 1917 Albert Einstein published a paper on cosmology—indeed the first significant modern paper on the subject—that was sufficiently implausible that he felt compelled at one point to write, "In the present paragraph I shall conduct the reader over the road I have myself traveled, rather a rough and winding road, because otherwise I cannot hope that he will take much interest in the result at the end of the journey." When it comes to the principal subject of this essay, Sir Edmund Gosse, I know what he meant, and for this reason I shall conduct the "reader over the road" that led me to that rather unlikely figure. In 1983 I was sent for review Daniel Boorstin's *Discoverers*—a book that gave a kaleidoscopic and not always accurate tour of the entire history of scientific discovery in 745 pages. On page 316, I came across the following laconic sentence: "In 1619, when Donne visited the Continent, he took the trouble to visit Kepler in the remote Austrian town of Linz." That was it. No explanation was offered. No discussion was presented of what Johannes Kepler and John Donne could possibly have found to say to each other. Indeed, how did such an incredibly implausible meeting ever take place? Were there any consequences? On all of this Boorstin was mute, and, worse, he did not even give a reference, so that one had no idea where to follow this up.

That was in 1983. For the next thirteen years, this matter rested unresolved, gnawing away somewhere in the back of my mind. Finally, in the fall of 1996, taking advantage of that leisure which retirement from full-time teaching affords, I decided that once and for all I would run it to ground. It wasn't easy. But with the help of colleagues from various parts of the country I finally succeeded. It turned out that the existence of this meeting was a discovery of the historian of science Wilbur Applebaum, who was then at the University of Illinois. He is now a professor emeritus at the Illinois Institute of Technology. Applebaum, he later informed me, had been rifling serendipitously through Johannes Kepler's *Gesammelte Werke*—the great multi-volume compendium of everything Kepler ever wrote—when he came across a letter from Kepler to a woman (no one has been able to identify her) describing a visit that had taken place some time earlier of a "Doctore Theologo" whom he identifies as Donne. The "doctore," he notes, was traveling "with His Royal Majesty's envoy, Mr. Doncastre [*sic*]." This is a reference to Lord Doncaster—James Hay—whom King James I of England had chosen to lead what turned out to be a futile mission to the Continent to head off the Thirty Years War.

Applebaum published a brief note on his discovery in the *Philological Quarterly*. He pointed out, incidentally, that the editors of Kepler's *Werke* had misdated the letter. They had given it as 1608, which is wrong for many reasons including the fact that Donne

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only received a "Doctore"—*honoris causa*—from Cambridge in 1615. (Donne was an Oxford man and getting this degree from Cambridge required some very powerful arm-twisting by the King.) Applebaum told me that he had great difficulty convincing the people then responsible for Kepler's collected works that someone there had made a mistake. In any event, among the few scholars who noted Applebaum's discovery was the Harvard astronomer and historian of science Owen Gingerich. In his biographical sketch of Kepler in *The Dictionary of Scientific Biography*, Gingerich makes a brief reference to the visit in terms almost identical to the language Boorstin used (presumably that is where Boorstin got his information) but with no reference to Applebaum. Incidentally, Gingerich also notes that a year after Donne's visit the British diplomat Sir Henry Wotton—former ambassador to Venice now on a special royal mission which was a sequel to Doncaster's and similarly came to nothing—had also visited Kepler. He seems to have suggested to Kepler that Kepler come to England. It is unclear whether this was a concrete offer or just a general invitation but, whatever it was, Kepler declined.

This solved the problem of the reality of the visit. But the Kepler letter itself was, at least at first sight, something of an anticlimax. It is quite clear from the letter that, apart from his association with Doncaster's mission, Kepler did not have the remotest idea who Donne was. This is especially ironic since we know for a fact—Kepler tells us—that he had read *Ignatius, His Conclave*, Donne's polemic satire against the Catholic Church, and especially the Jesuits, which he published in 1611 in both Latin and English. (Kepler did not know English, so whatever conversation he had with Donne must have been in Latin, since Donne did not know German.) Donne had published *Ignatius* anonymously, and there is no evidence—indeed such circumstantial evidence as there is, is negative—that Kepler had any idea that it was Donne who had written it. From the letter, it is clear that Kepler's only concern was that Donne use his influence to expedite the distribution of Kepler's new book, *Harmony of the World*, in England. But why did Donne want to visit Kepler? Here we seem to come up against a brick wall.

Donne went on this mission with a heavy heart. His wife had died two years earlier after having given birth to her twelfth child, which was still-born. He would have been quite content to stay in England with his remaining children, but King James ordered him to accompany Doncaster as chaplain to the mission. Before leaving England, Donne announced that he was not going to write any letters from the Continent. He did, in fact, write a few, but none that I have found make any mention of his visit to Kepler. Nor does any other contemporary document which I have been able to turn up. Still, in the hope that some scrap of commentary might exist, I have taken to reading all the various biographies, collections of letters, and historical studies of Donne that I can get hold of. Once one starts this, one is inevitably led to the figure of Sir Edmund Gosse.

In 1899 Gosse published a two-volume biography of Donne titled *The Life and Letters of John Donne*. To understand the significance of this, one must realize that since the first version in 1658 of Izaak Walton's life of Donne—later incorporated in Walton's *Lives* published in 1670—not a single full-scale biography of Donne had been written by anyone. Indeed, it is probably fair to say that it was Gosse's book that brought Donne's poetry back to life. With few exceptions (such as Coleridge), from the seventeenth century until the end of the nineteenth most critics would have agreed with Samuel Johnson when he wrote in his *Lives of the Poets*:

> The metaphysical poets were men of learning, and to show their learning was their whole endeavour; but unluckily resolving to show it in rhyme, instead of writing poetry they wrote only verses, and very often such verses as

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> stood the trial of the finger better than of the ear; for the modulation was so imperfect, that they were only found to be verses by counting the syllables.

But by the middle of the twentieth century quoting Donne had become almost a cliché. To take one remarkable example, when in 1962 General Leslie Groves, who had been in charge of the making of the atom bomb, wrote to Robert Oppenheimer to ask him how, in fact, he had chosen the name Trinity for the atomic test site in New Mexico, Oppenheimer replied that he thought that it was because he had been reading Donne's "Holy Sonnets," and in particular the fourteenth. The poem begins:

> Batter my heart, three personed God; for You
> As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek
> to mend;
> That I may rise and stand, o'erthrow me,
> and bend
> Your force, to break, blow, burn, and make
> me new.

If Einstein had not created the theory of relativity in 1905, then it would certainly have been created anyway. The facts would have demanded it. Likewise, if Gosse had not written his great biography in 1899, then Donne would surely have been rediscovered anyway. The poetry would have demanded it. But the course of history would have been different. It was Gosse's book, and his encouragement, that led Herbert Grierson to produce his great edition of Donne's poetry—the first real edition—in 1912. All the other editions are in some sense a footnote to Grierson. But it was not only Donne who was discovered or rediscovered by Gosse. Gosse, who had taught himself all the Scandinavian languages, introduced Ibsen, among other Scandinavian writers, into England at a time when no one was interested in him. Gosse got to know Ibsen and later wrote his biography. He championed Robert Louis Stevenson, with whom he had an especially close friendship. They met in 1874, when Stevenson was almost unknown, and two days before Stevenson's death in Samoa twenty years later, Stevenson wrote his last letter to Gosse. It began, "I was not born for age. . . ." Gosse also wrote a biography of Swinburne, whom he knew well. He was a close friend of Henry James and often visited Thomas Hardy. Late in his life, he championed the work of Gide, whom he got to know well also. He did, however, have some blind spots. He could not abide Joyce's *Ulysses* and had no use for the poetry of Eliot or Pound, although he greatly admired Yeats, Kipling, and Robert Graves, all of whom he knew and encouraged before they were famous. When Gosse died on May 16, 1928, he was arguably the most distinguished and best-known man of letters in England.

I use the term "man of letters" deliberately. I don't know quite what else to call him. The only figure closer to our time that I can think to compare him to is Edmund Wilson. One wonders what of Wilson's anyone will read fifty years from now. In all of Gosse's gigantic production, the only book that is still widely read is his autobiographical memoir, *Father and Son*, which he published in 1907. No one reads Gosse's poetry or his verse plays, and almost no one reads his literary studies, some of which had been newspaper or magazine columns that were immensely popular in their day. But few who have read *Father and Son* come away unmoved. The book may have been the first autobiography, at least in English, that relates with such intimacy and power the struggle of a son, Gosse, to break free from the overburdening presence of his father. It ends when Gosse is seventeen and has come to London alone. We don't know exactly why; Gosse does not tell us. What is almost inconceivable is that the seventeen-year-old boy in that book would become Sir Edmund Gosse. To unravel that mystery we have to look beyond the book itself.

Edmund William Gosse—his family and close friends always called him "Willy"—was born on September 21, 1849, in the London

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borough of Tottenham. His father, Philip Henry Gosse, was a well-known naturalist who over the years wrote and illustrated several beautiful books—now collector's items—mainly about British marine invertebrates. The elder Gosse is considered to be one of the original inventors of the aquarium (he certainly invented the name). While in his early twenties, Philip had a conversion to a kind of born-again fundamentalist Christianity, which led him to join an extreme Calvinistic congregation known as the Plymouth Brethren. It was through them that he met his first wife, Emily Bowes, who was, if anything, more piously puritanical than he was. Of his mother and father, Gosse writes in his autobiography, "Each was lonely, each was poor, each was accustomed to a strenuous intellectual self-support." They were married in 1848, and Gosse was born a year later. As he later wrote, "In this strange household the advent of a child was not welcomed, but was borne with resignation." This bleak assessment is not entirely supported by several letters that Ann Thwaite cites in her biography *Edmund Gosse: A Literary Landscape*. From Philip Gosse to his wife: "I do long to kiss him again and you too, my own love." But such warmth did not communicate itself to Gosse, at least as he remembered it a half-century later. There is, however, no dispute as to the discipline Gosse found himself subjected to. Gosse's mother had been informed as a child that any sort of story-telling was a sin. As a result, Gosse writes,

> Not a single fiction was read or told to me during my infancy. The rapture of the child who delays the process of going to bed by cajoling "a story" out of his mother or his nurse, as he sits upon her knee, well tucked up, at the corner of the nursery fire,—this was unknown to me. Never in all my early childhood, did anyone address to me the affecting preamble, "Once upon a time!" I was told about missionaries, but never about pirates; I was familiar with humming birds, but I had never heard of fairies. Jack the Giant-Killer, Rumpelstiltskin and Robin Hood were not of my acquaintance, and although I understood about wolves, Little Red Ridinghood was a stranger even by name.

And this from a child who would grow up to be the foremost British literary critic of his age!

In 1857 two events occurred of decisive importance to Gosse and his father. The first had to do with science. Although Darwin did not publish *Origin of Species* until 1859, its beginnings date back at least two decades earlier. In 1830 the geologist Charles Lyell published the first edition of his seminal book, *Principles of Geology*. Lyell's thesis was that present geological conditions developed uniformly from the past—if you like, an evolutionary theory of geology. Darwin had Lyell's book with him when he sailed on the *Beagle* in 1831, and the two men saw a good deal of each other after Darwin returned. In its simplest form, this theory conflicted with the biblical notion that the Earth was created entire in one catastrophic event. In his memoir, Gosse describes the effect that this had on his father:

> My Father had never admired Sir Charles Lyell. I think that the famous 'Lord Chancellor manner' of the geologist intimidated him, and we undervalue the intelligence of those whose conversation puts us at a disadvantage. For Darwin and [the British botanist Joseph] Hooker, on the other hand, he had a profound esteem, and I know not whether this had anything to do with the fact that he chose, for his impetuous experiment in reaction, the field of geology, rather than that of zoology or botany. Lyell had been threatening to publish a book on the geological history of Man, which was to be a bomb-shell flung into the camp of the catastrophists. My Father, after long reflection, prepared a theory of his own, which he fondly hoped would take the wind out of Lyell's sails, and justify geology to godly readers of "Genesis." It was, very briefly, that there had been no gradual modification of the surface of the earth, or slow devel-

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> opment of organic forms, but when the catastrophic act of creation took place, the world presented, instantly, the structural appearance of a planet on which life had long existed.

Philip Gosse wrote a book in which he adumbrated his masterpiece. He called it *Omphalos: An Attempt to Untie the Geological Knot*. The "omphalos" was a sacred Delphic icon—thought to be a conical stone—which symbolized the navel or center of the Earth. But to the author of *Omphalos* the issue had to do with the navel of Adam. Did Adam have one? He appears to have been created with all the attributes of a full-grown man including, presumably, a navel. If this miracle had happened, then why was it so difficult to imagine that God had created the Earth with all the fossils and other signs of age in place? This picturesque view of God as an antiquarian landscape artist is still with us in some of the more lunar Creationist literature. After the publication of his book in 1857, the senior Gosse waited for an outpouring of grateful appreciation. Instead, there was total hostility. Gosse quotes from a letter his father received from his friend, the author Charles Kingsley, who had a great interest in natural history. He wrote that he could not "give up the painful and slow conclusion of five and twenty years' study of geology, and believe God has written on the rocks one enormous and superfluous lie." The reaction that this storm of criticism produced in his father was total withdrawal. As Gosse notes, ". . . he closed the doors upon himself forever."

It was during this very time that Gosse's mother died. The great thing about *Father and Son* is that it is neither angry nor judgmental. Gosse loved both his father and mother. He simply wanted more air. Indeed, although Gosse does not say this in so many words, if his mother had not died when he was still very young he might well have remained suffocated forever. His mother died of breast cancer after having suffered terribly as much from an experimental treatment she tried as from the disease itself. Her last words, repeated several times to Gosse and his father, were, "Take our lamb, and walk with me!" As Gosse notes, ". . . what a weight, intolerable as the burden of Atlas, to lay on the shoulders of a little fragile child!" For a period of time, which Gosse remembered with pleasure, he was sent to live with relatives. But then his father took a house in St. Marychurch in Devonshire near the sea. Here, there was a small community of "Saints," and Philip became their spiritual leader. There is a photograph of Gosse and his father from about this time which, even if one did not know the people involved, has the sort of power that a great portrait painter can sometimes achieve. Both are dressed in black—the sort of outfits, one imagines, they would wear on a visit to the "Saints." The senior Gosse has a Bible in his right hand, with his left firmly around his son. The "lamb" appears to be firmly in hand. It is the expression on the younger Gosse's face, however, that lifts this portrait into greatness. He is not exactly looking at the Bible, and he is not exactly not looking at it. There is something in his eyes that lies between anger and fear. His mouth is a rigid line. He could have been thinking of anything. In fact, it was at about this time, Gosse tells us in *Father and Son*, that he made the discovery that he had a "self"—a part of him that was his and his alone and which no one including his father (above all his father) could penetrate.

Gosse did not know what to make of this discovery, but he knew that it was terribly important. It might have led nowhere, except that in 1860 Gosse's father remarried. The senior Gosse's second wife, Eliza Brightwen, came from a wealthy Quaker family. When she married the fifty-year-old Philip, she was a forty-seven-year-old spinster. She loved young Gosse and the feeling, which was life-long, was mutual. As pious as she became—she joined the elder Gosse's congregation—she had a taste for the arts and for poetry. The ban on reading fiction and poetry was lifted, but selectively.

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Gosse was permitted to read the poems of Sir Walter Scott but not the novels, although he was allowed to read the novels of Dickens. For the first time, he was allowed to attend school—a local school and then a boarding school. He began reading poetry voraciously, as well as writing it. And he began his study of languages. At the age of seventeen, he could note in an application for a position that he could speak German, write French, read Greek, Latin, and Italian, and that he had what he called a "rudimentary acquaintance" with Danish, Swedish, and Hebrew. He had scored very well in the so-called Senior Cambridge examinations and was without a doubt better educated than if he had gone to any of the great public schools. But there was no question of his going to a university. It was time for him to go to work, and the only question was at what.

Father and Son ends in 1867 with Gosse come alone to London to live. Though we are not told as much, what had happened was that Edmund's father, who had (even after the disaster of *Omphalos*) continued his very successful career as a popular naturalist, pulled every string he could think of to get his son the position of "Junior Assistant"—really a low-paying clerk's job—in the Department of Printed Books at the British Museum. Never was anyone so overqualified for a job. Gosse remained at it with essentially the same salary until 1875. In the meantime, he continued both his study of languages—adding Norwegian and Icelandic—and his poetry writing. Gosse wanted more than anything else in life to be a great poet. If only one could acquire genius by hard work! Gosse worked very hard as a poet—indeed at everything—but the poems, alas, cling limpetlike to the page. They refuse to soar. I do not think anyone knows how hard Donne worked to write a poem but my guess, based on nothing but intuition, is not very. Whereas Donne, in keeping with the practice of the time, handed out manuscript versions of poems to his friends like greeting cards, Gosse was desperately concerned about getting his poems published, if only to get critical reaction to them. His first collection, *Madrigals, Songs and Sonnets*, appeared in 1870, when he was still working full-time as a clerk. It was a collaboration with his friend John Blakie, and it sold twelve copies.

In the meantime, the relentless struggle with his father over his spiritual life went on. Just before he moved to London, Gosse had had an epiphany in which he had tried desperately to find the Lord and had failed. As he writes in *Father and Son*, "From that moment forth my Father and I, though the fact was long successfully concealed from him and even from myself, walked in opposite hemispheres of the soul with 'the thick o' the world between us.'" It wasn't that simple. Philip Gosse knew perfectly well that his son's faith was drifting away. Since he could not be in London to take his "lamb" by the hand, he attempted to do so by post. Letters rained down on Gosse like lead hammers. If he tried to reply to them evasively this would produce still more letters. As he writes in the epilogue to *Father and Son*, "Over such letters as these I am not ashamed to say that I sometimes wept; the old paper I have just been copying shows traces of tears shed upon it more than forty years ago, tears commingled with despair at my own feebleness, distraction, at my want of will, pity for my Father's manifest and pathetic distress." The struggle went on, although with diminishing intensity, practically until his father's death in 1888. What Gosse told no one until close to the end of his own life was that in his final hours his father had turned violently away from God. He had come to realize that despite all his piety he was going to die without a sign from his Lord. He felt betrayed, and he went to his death in a state of rage.

A friend of mine some years ago told me that a physics colleague of ours, who was noted in equal parts for his genius and his abrasive personality, had decided to seek the counsel of a psychoanalyst. My friend thought that this was a good idea, but he hoped the analysis would not "take the edge

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off." One wonders whether, if Gosse had gone to a university (something which he obviously deserved to do), it would have taken the edge off—the edge, in this case, of the ferocious autodidacticism that stayed with him all his life. On the positive side, however, it might have given him better scholarly habits. His friend Henry James once commented that Gosse had "a genius for inaccuracy," something that a rigorous university tutorial might have alleviated. All of Gosse's critical books are full of mistakes of detail. Many of them are pedantic but many are not. I was interested to note that in the best modern biography of Donne, *John Donne: A Life* by the late R. C. Bald, there are some forty footnotes referring to Gosse, most of them pointing out errors in Gosse's two-volume biography.

No doubt there would have been even more errors if Gosse had not been able to use the material gathered over many years in a country parish by a curate named Augustus Jessopp. In his introduction to the first volume of his biography (1899), Gosse writes,

> More than fifty years ago, when [Jessopp] was an undergraduate at Cambridge, he began to make collections illustrative of the character and writings of Donne. He could find no publisher to undertake such an enterprise. . . . In 1855 Dr. Jessopp brought out a reprint of [Donne's] *Essays in Divinity* with copious and learned notes which were little valued by reviewers of forty years ago, but which now prove how eminently well Dr. Jessopp was fitted to illuminate the theological characteristics of the great Dean of St. Paul's. After that, until 1897, the general public had no means of knowing how persistent was Dr. Jessopp's interest in everything connected with Donne, except through his excellent article in the "Dictionary of National Biography."

He continues:

> Many years have passed since, by a mere accident, I discovered how lively was still the enthusiasm felt for the Dean by our admirable historian of East Anglia. I, also, had been making collections for the biography, and my first impulse was to place them unreservedly in Dr. Jessopp's hands. . . .
>
> He claimed, however, that I should join him in the delightful labour. We soon found, however, a great difficulty in the road of our collaboration. In his own words Dr. Jessopp "has never been able to feel much enthusiasm for Donne as a poet," whereas to me, even to his last seraphical hour in his bedchamber at St. Paul's, Donne is quintessentially a poet.

Gosse was close to abandoning the project when Jessopp decided in 1897 to let Gosse write the biography and turned over all of the relevant materials.

Between the time we left Gosse in the British Museum and the time when he began his biography of Donne, a great deal had happened to him. In 1875 he was offered a job as translator to the Board of Trade. There was a very substantial raise in salary that enabled him to marry. He chose for his bride Ellen ("Nelly") Epps, the daughter of a surgeon. She was well-educated and was a talented artist, and theirs was a very happy marriage. The Gosses had two daughters and a son, who seem to have been brought up with all the intellectual stimulation that Gosse was deprived of in his own childhood. (The house was filled with books, and when Gosse died his library was sold for a small fortune.) One of the conditions of Gosse's new job was that he was to be allowed to continue his literary activities. He published biographies of Congreve and Gray, and several studies of European and English literature before he began working on his biography of Donne. The work at the Board of Trade was erratic but could be very demanding. Sheaves of dispatches would sometime arrive in the morning in various languages dealing with tariffs and trade and would have to be translated by the afternoon. (Reading about this vaguely reminded me of Einstein toiling away in the patent office in Bern while creating the theory of relativity in his spare time.)

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I said at the outset that I was led to Gosse because I was trying to learn how Donne's interest in Kepler and in the New Astronomy—a term seemingly first used by Kepler—had come about. What were Donne's feelings about this science, which in its day was at least as disturbing to the established order as was Darwinism in the nineteenth century? One does not learn much from Gosse. Gosse does point out that it had "hitherto escaped notice" that Donne was "completely captivated by the recent epoch-making discoveries in the science of astronomy." We now accept this as one of the clichés about Donne—although I think that Donne understood less of these discoveries than most people realize. In any event, it was Gosse who first pointed out the connection. He tells us that "Donne had been steeping himself in the sensational expansion of the New Astronomy," but he does not tell us how Donne heard about it in the first place. In this, Gosse is no worse off than his successors. Even Professor Bald, as I will now discuss, does not seem really to have a clue, or at least a clue that stands up to scrutiny.

Professor Bald offers two scenarios. The first is a notion that seems to have been invented by the late Marjorie Hope Nicolson. Nicolson thought that Donne had somehow gotten hold of a manuscript copy of Kepler's science-fiction novella *Somnium*, the first version of which Kepler wrote in 1609, although it was not published until 1634, four years after Kepler's death. This is the novella that describes an imaginary voyage to the Moon. At least three things are wrong with Nicolson's theory. In the first place, there is no evidence that any copy of this manuscript had reached England at the time we are discussing. In the second place, Donne marginally refers to Kepler in a note to *Biathanatos*, a tract he produced a year before Kepler wrote his draft. In the third place, if Donne had read *Somnium*, why wasn't this mentioned by Kepler in the letter he wrote describing their meeting? Kepler was almost childlike in his need to be appreciated. Is it conceivable that if Donne had mentioned reading this work some years earlier Kepler would not have shouted this from the housetops?

The second theory considered by Bald is that Donne had heard about Kepler from the very interesting British scientific polymath Thomas Hariot. It is true that Hariot had carried out a correspondence with Kepler. But the letters were few and infrequent and had to do with optics, not astronomy. That Donne had ever met Hariot remains unclear, yet Donne had somehow gotten hold of *De Stella Nova*, Kepler's book on the "new stars" (supernovae that had recently been observed), not long after its publication. I do not know how, and neither Bald nor Gosse has enlightened me.

On the matter of Galileo, we can I think be a little more precise. Galileo had in late 1609 managed to construct a telescope powerful enough to make interesting astronomical observations. In January 1610, he made several stunning discoveries: new stars, the moons of Jupiter, as well as mountains on our own Moon. In March, he reported on this in his great book *Sidereus nuncius*. The book was published in Venice when the English ambassador to that city was Donne's friend from Oxford —Henry Wotton. Alas, we do not have a letter from Wotton to Donne describing his reaction to Galileo's book (Donne often complained that Wotton was a dilatory correspondent), but we do have a letter from Wotton to the First Earl of Salisbury dated March 13, 1610. Salisbury was, at the time, the king's lord treasurer so that in some sense Wotton was writing to the Jacobean court. This is what he reports:

> Now touching the occurents of the present, I send herewith unto his Majesty [King James] the strangest piece of news (as I may justly call it) that he hath ever yet received from any part of the world; which is the annexed book [Galileo's *Sidereus nuncius*] (come abroad this very day) of the Mathematical Professor at Padua, who by the help of an optical instru-

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> ment (which both enlargeth and approximateth the object) first invented in Flanders, and bettered by himself, hath discovered four new planets rolling about the sphere of Jupiter, besides many other unknown fixed stars; likewise the true cause of the *Via Lactea*, so long searched [i.e., that it was made of stars]; and lastly, that the moon is not spherical, but endued with many prominences, and, which is all of the strangest, illuminated with the solar light by reflection from the body of the earth [during eclipses], as he seemeth to say. So, as upon the whole subject he hath first overthrown all former astronomy—for we must have a new sphere to save the appearances—and next all astrology.[1] For the virtue of these new planets must needs vary the judicial part, and why may there not yet be more? These things I have been bold thus to discourse unto your Lordship, whereof here all corners are full. And the author runneth a fortune to be either exceeding famous or exceeding ridiculous. By the next ship your Lordship shall receive from me one of the above-named instruments, as it is bettered by this man.

I do not know if Donne received a similar letter or if he saw this one, but I do know that by the end of the year of its arrival he had written *Ignatius, His Conclave*, which describes a voyage to the Moon. In Donne's voyage, the Moon has been made accessible by drawing it close to the Earth with a Galilean telescope. By the next year, Donne had published *An Anatomy of the World: The First Anniversary* with its indelible lines

> And new philosophy calls all in doubt,
> The element of fire is quite put out;
> The sun is lost, and the earth, and no man's wit
> Can well direct him where to look for it.

This then raises to me one of the most puzzling questions of all: why did Donne seek Kepler out in Linz? What was he hoping to learn?

There seems to be no known comment from Donne about the visit itself. But we do know something about his attitude toward science and religion. One of Gosse's great contributions was to attempt to order the inchoate mass of Donne's correspondence which had partially been published without regard for date or even the identity of the persons to whom they were addressed. The first of these publications was by Donne's son in 1651, and another, equally unruly, was published in 1660 by Sir Toby Mathew. Gosse and Jessopp did their best to bring some coherence to these collections. One long epistle from Donne to perhaps his closest friend, Sir Henry Goodyer, with whom he exchanged letters as often as once a week, Gosse dates as sometime in April of 1615. The letter deals with Catholics and Protestants and the New Astronomy. The following few lines jumped out at me:

> I will not, nor need to you, compare the religions. The channels of God's mercies run through both fields; and they are sister teats of His graces, yet both diseased and infected, but not both alike. And I think, that . . . Copernicism in the mathematics hath carried earth farther up, from the stupid centre; and yet not honoured it, nor advantaged it, because for the necessity of appearances it hath carried heaven so much higher from it. . . .

I wonder if Gosse when he read this thought back to his father. For Philip Henry Gosse, the new science had carried heaven just so much farther away.

1 "A new sphere . . ." refers to the notion, in the pre-Keplerian version of the Copernican system, that celestial objects were attached to spheres which revolved. The observed motions of stars and planets were not uniform and circular so that spheres in various eccentric positions had to be added to "save the appearances." Wotton did not understand, and neither did Donne, that the real New Astronomy was Kepler's discovery that planets moved in elliptical orbits—curves in space—and not on attached spheres. I see no evidence from anything that Donne wrote that he had the slightest grasp of this.

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Balanchine's castle

by Laura Jacobs

This winter, *Jewels* reappeared in New York City Ballet repertory the way it does every few years, like a mirage of overwhelming majesty, a floating castle set amid fairy forests and ancient icecaps, a castle guarding its secrets.[1] The night before the first performance, NYCB held a seminar on *Jewels* for its Guild members. Dancers from the ballet's premiere on April 13, 1967—Conrad Ludlow, Suki Schorer, and Edward Villella—were onstage to speak about that night, those steps, the rehearsals, and, of course, the ballet's choreographer, George Balanchine. The moderator, Francis Mason, began by explaining that Balanchine had a PR angle when he conceived *Jewels*: he thought Van Cleef & Arpels might foot the bill (lo, City Ballet got not a sou). It was also to be just one ballet, but when Balanchine began working, his idea grew, and soon there were two ballets, then three. In rehearsal, the work was referred to as "Jewels," but on the night of the premiere it went untitled because management was still waffling over what to call this strange evening. The three sections, however, were called "Emeralds," "Rubies," and "Diamonds."

The rehearsal title won out, and *Jewels* became famous as the "first three-act plotless ballet." Its sheer size was dazzling, and, as Ludlow explained at the seminar, "we were in transition still from City Center [to the New York State Theater at Lincoln Center] and I think that was one of the purposes of the ballet, part of the concept—the gigantic scale." Balanchine wanted to show that his dance and his dancers could fill this larger stage.

"There was a kind of pandemonium in the theater that night," said Suki Schorer, recalling that it wasn't until the premiere that the dancers knew they were taking part in a masterpiece. In *The New York City Ballet*, Lincoln Kirstein writes, "*Jewels* has been an unequivocal and rapturous 'success' since its introduction; the very title sounds expensive before a step is seen." Rich is how *Jewels* really looks, and not so much in terms of money (the sets are less than minimal, parures of gemstones pasted on a bare backdrop). *Jewels* is immediately sensuous, saturated, a pleasure-dome decreed. Its crystal and glycerine surface is magic, but inside you begin to feel shadows and murmurs, and the undertow.

Indeed, the audience at the Guild Seminar seemed to be in a state of "I know, but I don't know what I know," for question after question was put to the dancers, each one ignoring the fact of *Jewels*'s plotlessness. Did Balanchine explain what was happening in *Jewels*? Did he tell you what it meant or was about? ("Rubies" was "about twenty minutes," Villella was told by Mr. B.) Did he discuss your character, your role? No, no,

1 *Jewels* was performed five times between January 6 and January 24, 1998, at the New York State Theater, Lincoln Center.

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and no, came the answers. The castle was guarding its secrets.

Jewels doesn't demand that you dissect it. It can be enjoyed as pure spectacle, beginning with the colors. The lighting design of Ronald Bates and the costumes of Madame Karinska work in brilliant complicity; Bates makes palpable poetic weather of his lighting, which Karinska's costumes either sink into ("Emeralds") or bounce out of ("Rubies") or refract ("Diamonds"). And so the French-opaline greens that soften and blur the edges of "Emeralds" create a plush and pillowy space, a netherworld love-nest. The sharp red of "Rubies" practically vibrates against a cindery light; it's a red with black in it, royal and radical at once. And the snow-crystal radiance of "Diamonds" is underlit with a blue as pale as a vein in a slim white wrist.

Karinska's costumes are jaw-droppers. The tutus vary—long and misted in "Emeralds," hip-short and heraldic in "Rubies," stiff sprays in "Diamonds"—but all the bodices, whether green, red, or white, are glittering armatures, intricately seamed and encrusted with jewels, part Tennyson, part Dior. These bodices are fascinating. That reverse décolleté, a passementerie of jewels curving *under* each breast like Baroque scrollwork, leaves the bosom naked (actually, sheathed in nude fabric). It's an odd and erotic eyecatcher, suggesting maidens framed high in tower windows, awaiting the troubadours' song. That song is different in each section, and thus *Jewels*'s faceting begins.

Much has been written about the three parts or panels of *Jewels*, and they can be differentiated with ease. "Emeralds" is French, set to romantic Fauré, dreamy and somnambulistic. "Rubies" is American, neoclassical Stravinsky, nervy and voracious. "Diamonds" is Imperial Russia, palatial Tchaikovsky, tender and at times ecstatically elegiac. You can keep *Jewels* in these compartments, and read it as a lavishly illustrated monograph on Balanchine's lifelong preoccupations, circa 1967: his experimentation with national styles of classical dancing, his exploration of his own aesthetic affinities—with Paris and Petipa, with Stravinsky and Tchaikovsky. You can even pop out a panel and perform it solo, as has been done with "Rubies" all around the world. But the wholeness of *Jewels* is also the power and glory of *Jewels*.

The score for "Emeralds" was pieced together by Balanchine from incidental music Fauré composed for theater productions of *Pelléas et Mélisande* (1898) and *Shylock* (1889), and it combines impressionist washes of sound, perfumed and yearning, with simple woodcut melodies that seem sprung from medieval lore. "Emeralds" finds Balanchine deep in the poetic realm of Coleridge and Keats—it's an enchanted forest filled with Darke Ladies and muses on the make—and in the compositional genre of hunt and vision scenes (*Swan Lake*, *The Sleeping Beauty*) and twilight gardens (*Serenade*). It is a work of trance and transparency. You feel you can reach through the green of "Emeralds" and grasp nothing.

What explains this disconnection? To begin with, the pyramidal dance structures of "Emeralds"—its solos, duets, pas de trois, and ensembles—suggest a fairy court on the order of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and yet not one but two women are at the top: a first ballerina and, a faint shade beneath her, a second. The Paris Opéra-trained Violette Verdy originated the first role, and put her stamp on a solo that is like no other solo in Balanchine ballet. Intimate, bright, it's an aria of upper-body animation, hands, arms, and shoulders preening, self-regarding, scintillating—a Jewel Song. This ballerina wraps herself and her thoughts in pure port de bras (a Verdy specialty). She seems lost in some fantasy—or found—we do not know. The second ballerina also has a solo, but she is more famous for the "walking duet," a measured, measureless passage—on pointe—along a winding path in which she is supported by a man of whom she is unaware.

Verdy's solo is, in cinematic lingo, the ballet's establishing shot, for with this solo

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Jewels fixes on a pervasive Balanchine preoccupation—the unknowable woman. The second ballerina seconds it. The inequality of these two roles may be that the first is awake and the second asleep. Together, the two add up to a single ambivalence, a sensibility torn or in flux—like Titania in her two states (self-possessed, then spellbound by Oberon), or those twins in confusion, Hermia and Helena ("I have found Demetrius like a jewel/ Mine own, and not mine own"). "Emeralds" ends with three men down on one knee like knights who have dismounted, their eyes sweeping the path for signs of her, the troubled ideal.

In "Rubies" the men have remounted—they're chess knights (and pawns)—and the girls are fillies, tomboys, pin-ups, Broadway gypsies, Gypsy Rose Lees, the whole fast-striding, high-kicking, gear-stripping gamut of leggy American allure. Stravinsky's percussive score, Capriccio for Piano and Orchestra, is syncopated like rush hour, then cocktails: you hear the subway rumbling underneath, feel neon Broadway and New York noir take over. In response to the "Rubies" = America equation, Balanchine has said "I did not have that in mind at all." Nevertheless, the first glittering glimpse of "Rubies"—its cast holding hands upstage in a paper-doll arc, poised on pointe—never fails to draw a gasp of appreciation from the audience. It's a city skyline at night, the Big Apple ablaze.

It is in "Rubies" that you clearly see Balanchine using his jeweler's tools, concentrating on the angled body positions of classical dance—*écarté, effacé, croisé*—and throwing in *épaulé*, an upper-body arrangement that pulls the arms and torso in prismatic opposition to the lower body, creating a kind of dynamic duality, directional energies at cross purposes. All this was in "Emeralds," but subliminal, cloaked in haze and dew. "Rubies," so overtly athletic, is more pointed. Substitute leotards for those rich red Karinskas with their clacking plackets, and "Rubies" could take its place in Balanchine's black-and-white wing, next to the quantum physics of *The Four Temperaments* and *Agon*.

As in "Emeralds," there are two female leads in "Rubies," but this time one is a true principal, the other a soloist. The lead was originated by tiny Patricia McBride, the second by bigger Patricia Neary. "Rubies" belongs to McBride, but where she seems to be cozily moated in the pas de deux, that sirenlike second girl runs roughshod through the ballet, hitting cheesecake poses that drive the male corps mad. In one graphic sequence four men dive at her in succession, each grabbing a wrist or an ankle. They proceed to manipulate her into split *penchées* and leg extensions, again along the grammatical cuts of *effacé* and *écarté*. Mantrap or manhandled? This role is always cast with a "tall girl." Her m.o. is seduction, and she is the "Rubies" theme writ large.

For smack at the center of "Rubies" is an encounter *sui generis*, a Genesis—the pas de deux originated by McBride and Edward Villella—and smack at the end of that is a tree. Not literally, but the pas de deux finishes with McBride standing downstage, her arms splayed like branches, Villella snug behind her and climbing around. In a nursery rhyme of intertwining limbs, Villella finally opens out a hand and McBride drops something unseen into his palm. It's that other apple of course—"Rubies" red.

The brilliance of McBride was that with her sinuous, spiky style she turned Original Sin into a one-woman show: in "Rubies" she's Eve *and* the serpent, the apple *and* the tree. Balanchine leads us to man's first story of seduction with a more recent story straight out of the ballet canon, though, again, McBride is the only ballerina who's truly shown it to us. The sensation of black one feels in the red of "Rubies" is none other than Odile, the black swan from *Swan Lake*, the imposter-swan who seduces the prince away from gentle white swan Odette, and destroys his life. There is a diagonal in "Rubies" straight out of the Black Swan pas de deux, as well as other Odile-isms—those distorted and dominating attitudes that relentlessly pull on the man. McBride

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danced this pas de deux with come-hither casualness, a faux-swan insinuation and feline triumph. In "Rubies," Balanchine sees Woman as forbidden fruit, eternal Eve, downfall.

"Diamonds" has been called an "Odette fantasy," and as a friend recently observed, it feels like the fifth act—a wish fulfillment—of four-act *Swan Lake*. Actually, Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 3, from which the music is taken, was composed in the summer of 1875, just months before Tchaikovsky began work on *Swan Lake*. There are links between the two scores in key and orchestration, almost as if Tchaikovsky were tuning up for *Swan Lake*, testing the waters (still cold) and feeling his way into the forest. Certainly, Balanchine hears it this way. The pas de deux in "Diamonds" refracts imagery from the pas in *Swan Lake* Act Two: the vow of love; Odette's arrowy path (so like the winding path in "Emeralds"). In this act of *Jewels*, there is only one ballerina—Suzanne Farrell. She is aware of her isolation and the windswept forces around her.

Farrell was Balanchine's growing obsession throughout the 1960s, and when he choreographed *Jewels* the obsession was in full bloom. In a *New Yorker* essay on *Jewels* published in 1983, Arlene Croce writes, "If I had to guess how the piece was made, I'd say that Balanchine worked backward from the pas de deux of Diamonds. . . ." This is an assessment of Farrell's power as creative muse. Croce also describes how in "Diamonds," mixed in with the Odette iconography, there are pawing steps and forward extensions that allude to the unicorn in the Cluny tapestries. Croce's view is supported by Farrell herself, who writes in her autobiography of 1991, *Holding on to the Air*, of how Balanchine took her to the Musée de Cluny to see *The Lady and the Unicorn* tapestries. Of the sixth tapestry she writes: "He loved the title *A Mon Seul Désir* ["To My Only Desire"] and said he wanted to make a ballet for me about the story of the unicorn." It seems safe to say that "Diamonds" is that ballet, or rather, that *Jewels* is, that it was the white glow of the unicorn that Balanchine chased into the forest, only to find himself in a thicket of haunting and hunted creatures. Claude Debussy himself began at the end when he composed *Pelléas et Mélisande*. The first thing he wrote was the climactic Act Four love duet, as if to make for himself a white light at the end of the tunnel—which he needed because the forests of *Pelléas et Mélisande* are so thick and dark that "there are places where you never see the sun." What are these forests but the human psyche? And what is light but love? And who is Mélisande?

"Only the most beautiful emeralds contain that miracle of elusive blue," wrote Colette in *Gigi*. And it is through elusive blue we must travel if we are to grasp *Jewels*, through Fauré and Debussy and the playwright Maurice Maeterlinck to the deep-sea mystery of Mélisande, the ingenue-soprano who has kept opera lovers guessing for almost a century. She is the central question of Maeterlinck's play, for she herself will answer no questions. We, along with Golaud, the older man who marries her, know only where he found her—Maeterlinck's stage direction reads: "*A forest. Mélisande discovered at the brink of a spring.*" It could be Balanchine's stage direction for "Emeralds." Mélisande is lost and weeping, has dropped the crown she was wearing into the spring, and will later drop her wedding ring there as well (a Freudian slip of the fingers). Pelléas is Golaud's younger half-brother, and he has instant affinity with Mélisande, which becomes love and leads to his death at the hand of Golaud. Where Pelléas believes in "the truth, the truth, the truth," Mélisande offers evasion, as if unversed in human rules. She nurses a secret sorrow, and is allied with water, fountains, the sea.

What—not who—is Mélisande, may be the better question. There are those who believe she is one of the water sprites immortalized (and they are immortal, unless they mix with humans) in Friedrich, Baron de la Motte Fouqué's story *Undine* (1811). Also, the name Mélisande is very like Mé-

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lusine, the undine of a famous French fairy tale. (Mélusine marries a human on the terms that he must never interrupt her privacy. Breaking the terms, he enters her chamber and finds her transformed, playing in a pool. She leaves him.) And in Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande*, a work of ravishing irresolution begun in 1893 and premiered in 1902, the closest the composer comes to a true aria occurs when Mélisande lets her otherworldly hair fall from a window. Mermaids are known for two things—their long, long hair, and their song.

Although "Emeralds" has been likened to a tapestry, to chivalric France, to green earth, it has always been described with liquid images. Verdy commented on its "underwater quality," and Kirstein described it as a "submarine summer-green garden." In his book *George Balanchine*, Richard Buckle reports that in 1958 Balanchine had discovered the music of Fauré and imagined a "tipped ballroom" behind a scrim with "a projection of the sea . . . which pulsates." It not only makes musical-textual sense that the first ballerina in "Emeralds" is an undine, but it also makes sense choreographically. In Verdy's solo, it is easy to see a woman modeling bracelets and tiaras. When asked if Balanchine ever mentioned such jewelry, Verdy answered, "No. No bracelets." It is just as easy to see Undine or Mélusine in her imaginative element, wearing water droplets like gems. In fact, it was only during this season's round of *Jewels* that those Karinska costumes—so charming, so puzzling—struck me with new depth. That bare bosom, accentuated by gemwork, and those bodices so tightly seamed and sheathed beneath, recreate the naked flash and surge of mermaids.

"Rubies" is more Lorelei Lee than Undine, the golddigger with no regrets (*rubies* are a girl's best friend). But in "Diamonds" the green-blue waters of "Emeralds" turn to frost and ice. Tchaikovsky's hunting horns seem to answer the far-off horn calls in "Emeralds." Furthermore, Balanchine knew that the watery theme of *Swan Lake*'s Act Two—the lakeside pas de deux—was not original to *Swan Lake*. Tchaikovsky recycled it from an earlier, failed opera, *Undina*. Balanchine has given Farrell some swan queen flutterings. Yet she also reiterates the undine port de bras of Verdy's solo, with a heightened, perhaps frightened emphasis. Where Verdy drew delight from her invisible spring center stage, Farrell draws awesome strength and scale.

Move in close and *Jewels* acts more like a solitaire under a spotlight, a single gem glinting a spectrum of hue and allusion. *Jewels* is knee deep in French Symbolists, Mallarmé as much as Maeterlinck. Listen closely to Fauré, and you hear Debussy's tumescent woodwinds, Mallarmé's *faune* stretching in the leaves, wondering "Loved I a dream?" *Jewels* takes up the tensions of the Symbolists, who took up symbols of the Romantics before them—their use of the half-human to understand the human, their sense of the dislocation between possession and privacy, infatuation and freedom. *Jewels* is a vision touched with myths of transformation, with the conflicting impulses of escape and rescue. That the mermaid swims through all channels of *Jewels* is yet another flash of recognition: mermaids have always symbolized the free flow of the mind, the sea of the subconscious. The questions whispered in these waters and woods are the stuff of Balanchine's dreams, and they are unanswerable: to what extent can you possess a woman, a wife, a ballerina? To what extent can you possess your Only Desire without killing it?

There is an alternate view to Mélisande's identity, and its meanings move deep and dark under *Jewels*. This analysis also comes by way of the opera. If Mélisande has dropped her crown into the spring, the obvious next question is, who gave her the crown? She says: "It is the crown he gave me. . . . I will have no more of it! I had rather die." The scholar Henri Barraud identifies Mélisande as one of Bluebeard's ex-wives escaped from his castle. Perhaps she is a wife to be. One of Charles Perrault's more rigid and unforgiving tales (it's hard

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to call it a fairy tale), *Bluebeard's Castle* connects with *Pelléas et Mélisande* in its atmosphere of hot and cold unknowns, its Symbolist portents ripe with erotic suggestion. Another link is Maeterlinck himself. He wrote a version of the tale called *Ariane et Barbe-Bleue*, and he named one of the wives Mélisande.

In brief, *Bluebeard's Castle* is the story of old Bluebeard's young bride, who, in order to know him better, asks for keys to the seven locked doors in his castle. He gives her all the keys but as a test of fidelity forbids her opening the seventh door. In some versions of *Bluebeard's Castle*—Béla Bartók's opera of 1918, for instance—the keys are given with no stipulations, only foreboding. In eerie empathy, Bartók accompanies the opening of each door with a wash of color—*Jewels*-like lighting effects in red, blue-green, gold, and bright white. Beyond the doors are rooms, each room a facet of Bluebeard's wealth. We see one by one the torture chamber, the armory, the house of jewels, the garden, Bluebeard's lands, a Lake of Tears. Finally, from the seventh room, three ex-wives emerge, the loves of Bluebeard's dawn, noon, and evening. This new wife must take her place behind the seventh door as the wife of Bluebeard's nights.

Violette Verdy once coached Suki Schorer in her role in "Emeralds" and passed on the story she'd invented for herself. "It happens in a bedroom," Verdy insisted. Schorer, imagining a glorious Parisian apartment, repeated this interpretation to Balanchine, who replied "no it doesn't." But Verdy's instincts ring true. *Jewels* does feel like a castle full of rooms, doors opening onto air. Without imposing Bluebeard too rigidly on Balanchine, you *can* see the kingdom's gardens and woodlands in "Emeralds." As for the torture chamber and armory, that would be blood-red "Rubies." At the seminar, Villella made no bones about the fact that his role in "Rubies" was a "gutcruncher," aerobically brutal. He asked Balanchine to change a long stretch that left him gasping for breath, and got one hardly helpful rest in the wings. And I go back to that moment in which the tall girl is manacled by four men, then drawn and quartered.

"Diamonds" is the sixth room, the Lake of Tears, for, as we know from the Act Two mime of *Swan Lake*, Odette resides in the lake made of her mother's tears. And "Diamonds" is the seventh room, too. Like Bluebeard, Balanchine had wives throughout his life. In 1967, when Balanchine was sixty-three, there were three ex-wives alive (plus one common-law ex, Alexandra Danilova); he was currently married to his fourth wife Tanaquil Le Clercq; and was in love with the woman he wanted to be the fifth, the twenty-one-year-old Farrell. She was his Hope diamond, the ballerina in *Jewels* who doesn't share the stage with a second because she was all women, all enchantments—unicorn, swan, undine—in one.

When Balanchine choreographed *Jewels*, he did not know Farrell would refuse him. They were still in the flush of their affinity, and the finale he put on "Diamonds"—not the actual suicide-apotheosis of *Swan Lake*, but a wedding-coronation—reflects his hope for a happy ending. In her autobiography, Farrell tells of how she and Mr. B. went to Van Cleef & Arpels and "while cameras clicked away, George and M. Arpels threw priceless jewelry at me. They even took the crowns of Empress Josephine and the Czarina out of the vault and put them on my head. We were like children locked in a candy store." Or in the third room, the House of Jewels.

Farrell didn't wish to stay locked in. Balanchine's ardor grew; he wanted to have and to hold, and in 1969, in an act of escape, Farrell married a dancer her own age, Paul Mejia. The couple was banished.

Filling the ballerina roles of *Jewels* once the first ladies left them has always been a company challenge, though these days it can feel more like a confrontation. The bigness of *Jewels* requires clarity and an air-cushion of commitment around that clarity. The romance of *Jewels* requires delicacy. Yet how small so many performances feel today.

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Unlike McBride in "Rubies" and Farrell (who came back in 1975) in "Diamonds," both dancing their roles well into the 1980s, Verdy left NYCB and "Emeralds" in the Seventies. The most crucial ballet in *Jewels* because it is the one that casts the spell, "Emeralds" today is a scent without complexity, a profound evocation reduced to prettiness. Well, it has been this way for a long time, and people have been complaining ever since Verdy left, though I've never forgotten Stephanie Saland in the role, smoky and remote. Neither Miranda Weese nor Kathleen Tracey was up to her level of imaginative interest, let alone Verdy's, though I had great expectations for Weese, who has been quietly sublime in some of the more stylistically distilled Balanchine roles—in the first movement of *Symphony in C*, for example, and in the first movement of *Brahms-Schoenberg Quartet*—and who is the only young NYCB principal with upper body sophistication.

Weese in "Rubies" was another story. While Margaret Tracey had great glitter, she tired visibly, showing chinks. Wendy Whelan had wit and snap, yet there was no sense of seduction, or, as critic Robert Greskovic put it, "no silk." Weese, however, put silky and sinful together, adding her own prancing élan. The longer she was on stage, the stronger and more tonally secure she got—and she took the audience with her. I've never seen a bare back used to such effect in this ballet. It somehow magnified her serenely correct carriage, which in turn called attention to her reserves of stillness, a facet of true musicality and something very rare in ballet today (though it didn't used to be rare). In start-and-stop "Rubies," Weese used her ability to really stop (versus the usual pause), and showed what a decisive, dramatic impact a full stop can have. In the three *Jewels* I saw, "Rubies" was the ballet that caught the audience—its energies are cracklingly coherent in the computer age—and it was Weese's "Rubies" that plugged in.

Darci Kistler and Kyra Nichols took turns with difficult "Diamonds." Both have performed it before, and both have recently had first babies, which is to say there is a built-in subtraction of strength. In Kistler, too much subtraction. She satisfied herself with effects (a halo here, a silvery spin there) but caught no current of sustained concentration. She now looks little, and brittle, in the face of Tchaikovsky's grandeur, unable to find herself in the fine skeins of the soliloquy or to take might from the music's ascent. Nichols, however, not as technically tight as she has been in the past, connects on ever higher levels, bringing to "Diamonds" a moving and magisterial sense of float. She's the last Balanchine ballerina on the roster, and the hush and dignity of her placement attest to it. She's monumental, Tolstoyan, unspooling arabesques and pirouettes in the white-marble corridor of Tchaikovsky's Scherzo, snow moving out of her way in drifts. She has made "Diamonds" her own lonely winter palace.

A final note. During the guild seminar, Edward Villella, who is now the artistic director of the Miami City Ballet, the only company other than NYCB ever to stage a complete *Jewels*, told of how he had invited all three ballerinas—Violette Verdy, Patricia McBride, and Suzanne Farrell—to coach his ballerinas in their roles. He praised the commitment and skill of all three equally. And then he paused, angled his body toward the audience, and moved into a more searching key, as if to grapple with something difficult. It was his opinion that Suzanne had become too serious in her devotion to Balanchine, serving his memory and coaching his ballets as if she were wearing a mantle, and maybe it was too much. That Villella was compelled to voice this particular feeling—saying what has been unsaid—in the context of this particular ballet should come as no surprise. Is it not another shock from the house of *Jewels*? Farrell didn't marry Balanchine in his lifetime, but she has become the wife of his nights.

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Poems *by David Mason, Robert B. Shaw, David R. Slavitt & Mary Stewart Hammond*

A meaning made of trees

from a phrase by Seamus Heaney

This bedroom high in the old house,
its roof pitched steeply overhead,

traps the lakewater sounds, afloat
on what it holds: liquid lapping.

I could lie here half the day long,
hearing rain wrung out of the sky,

windows open, so the outer
breath and green of the world get in.

The alder's scabbed, serrated leaves
that will fail later in the fall

fulfill themselves, a waterfall
steeped in the greening chlorophyll.

That stir of limbs against the roof
must be the native Douglas fir—

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a winter friend because it keeps
the housebound memory evergreen.

Most of all, the cedar rises,
huge and straight, the hulking host

and omphalos of my dream world,
its rootedness a kind of triumph.

—David Mason

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The future perfect

It will be recognizable: your neighborhood,
with of course some of the bigger trees
gone for pulp and the more upscale houses
sporting new riot-proof fencing which
they seem hardly to need in this calm sector
whose lawns look even more vacuumed than they used to.
Only a soft whir of electric automobiles
ruffles unburdened air. Your own house looks
about the same, except for the solar panels.
Inside, the latest occupants sit facing
the wall-size liquid crystal flat TV screen
they haggle and commune with, ordering beach towels
or stockings, or instructing their stockbrokers,
while in the kitchen dinner cooks itself.
Why marvel over windows that flip at a touch
from clear to opaque, or carpets that a lifetime
of scuffs will never stain? This was all destined,
down to the newest model ultrasound toothbrush.
Only the stubborn, ordinary ratio
of sadness to happiness seems immune to progress,
and it will take more time than even you
have at your disposal to find out why.
The same and not the same, this venue fascinates,
spiriting you through closed familiar doors
on random unremarkable evenings when
you will have been gone
for how long? —Just a little bit longer than your successors
have had to make these premises their own.
However much their climate-controlled rooms
glow vibrant with halogen, they will not see you.
But they may wonder why, for no clear reason,
they find their thoughts so often drawn to the past.

—Robert B. Shaw

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Airedales

Those who did it are dead now. And what they did,
they were trained to do and had no choice, no freedom.
Still, when I read in some book review that the camps'
guard dogs were "Alsatians, Airedales, and Doberman
pinschers" I can't help blaming the dogs of these breeds,
even though they have no idea what breeds they are.

Alsatians? Of course. And Dobermans? They are weapons
that sometimes wag their tails. But Airedales?
Yappy
clowns they are, huge terriers after all.
Frisky perhaps . . . But then the zebra-suited
Musselmänner didn't think they were cute
as they watched the attacks of those packs of killer dogs.

But the National Association for the Advancement
of Airedales? And the Airedale Anti-defamation League?
And the liberal line that says I cannot blame
a class for what some members may have done?
They are all correct, as I admit at once.
But I would cross the street to avoid an Airedale.
And I would not have an Airedale in my house.

—*David R. Slavitt*

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The GWB in the rain

Late winter. Ice cold and drained of color
as fingertips cut off from oxygen.
Heading south on the Henry Hudson

the road curves, and through the vertical
tangle of tree trunks and bare branches
the idea of a bridge appears, erased

and returned by the windshield wipers.
Suspenders thin as harp strings lift
the horizontal span to meet

a pair of silvery catenary curves
so much the color of the day
their outlines look drawn in pencil on the sky,

the volume of each cable, four feet
in diameter and made of enough
miles of wire to crank us halfway

to the moon, reading like paper
pouring through a watercolor,
like the silence in music. Water,

cliffs, sky, birds flicker in the Xs
and Vs of its bare piers and towers,
the latticed girders soaring up

through space singing with the economy
of a poem held captive by its form,
claiming no more of the heavens and earth

than necessary to do its job.
From outside the car, the landscape's palette
of greys and browns, and our black umbrella,

frame the steel bridge sliding off
into the clouds draped like angel hair
over the denuded trees filigreed on the Palisades.

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To anyone standing on the New Jersey side
Manhattan would look the same, the bridge's
thrust vaporizing into the mists masking

the 179th Street anchorage, a picture
of just how real the connection
between Manhattan and America is.

To the figures on barges plying the river,
and on the brigantine materializing
under power from the white breath of the Hudson's

mouth, who see the bridge more nearly dead on,
the toy cars and trucks skimming its motion
east and west must seem to drive off the world.

As we watch, fog snuffs out the third dimension
and civilization (except for the baffled roar
of traffic), and the penciled bridge

fades, as if time had wound backward
to the blank page in Othmar Ammann's sketch pad,
leaving only the glimmer of a red lighthouse

for just such conditions, there
at the bottom left-hand edge of the waterscape,
close by the downstream flank of the bridge,

guarding Jeffrey's Point,
an artifact from our century's childhood,
freshly painted and well maintained as any

childhood, beckoning, not even ankle high
to the bridge, barely three humans high,
its bell silenced, its lens gone.

—Mary Stewart Hammond

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Theater

"Capeman" crusaders

by Mark Steyn

The first revolutionary breakthrough in *The Capeman* comes even before curtain up: the standard announcement about not taking photographs or using sound recording devices is delivered in English—and then repeated in Spanish. All around the Marquis Theatre, the audience applauds approvingly; many of them cheer deliriously; some of them have, apparently, never been more ecstatically happy in their lives.

And then the curtain rises, and the cheers die down, and they never really come back. The producers of the first purpose-built Broadway musical by a bona fide baby-boom rock star must wonder why they didn't quit while they were ahead. What happens in the next two and a half hours is a tragedy—and I don't mean the story of Sal "The Capeman" Agron, a poor fatherless kid from Puerto Rico growing up an outsider in the seething tenements of 1950s New York, a confused boy who starts running with the gang and winds up in pretty much the same predicament as every juvenile delinquent in every teen rebel movie ever made. Of course, composer-librettist Paul Simon and his co-author Derek Walcott know where to point the finger: society's to blame. Pondering the fate of their Broadway debut, they probably feel much the same: two naïve kids from the rock biz and the poetry biz, armed only with the traditional keepsakes of their native cultures (a best-album Grammy Award and the Queen's Medal for Poetry), they never stood a chance—innocent outsiders in a cruel world who wind up running with the focus groups and party bookers and play doctors, all claiming to offer protection from the ruthless gangs of Jewish matinee ladies in their terrifying gang colors (blue hair). After Act I, the woman behind me turned to her friend and sighed, "Oy, what a mish-mosh. It's another *Nick and Nora*"—the doomed 1992 Broadway adaption of the *Thin Man* movies. The ladies didn't return for Act Two.

In considering the question of why "the hottest ticket in town" went into meltdown, it helps to remember the essential difference between Simon and his protagonist: whatever the opposite of a victim of society is, Simon and Walcott and their director, the *soi-disant avant-garde* choreographer Mark Morris, are it. Admittedly, most media commentators have a limited taste for poetry and dance, but yoke them to the thinking man's rock star and it's the coolest combination in town. The assumption was that all these guys had to do on Broadway was show up—for who in their right minds could honestly favor Jerry Herman or Kander and Ebb over Paul Simon?

It's a reasonable supposition. After all, the baby boomers have moved on from rock 'n' roll to annex, effortlessly, virtually every other area of American life—from TV and movies to the very presidency—notwithstanding that, to some of us, including James Bowman in January's *New Criterion*,

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the very notion of generational solidarity is bizarre. "Hope I die before I get old," sang another Sixties rocker. Unfortunately, and despite sterling efforts on the part of its practitioners, rock has declined to afford us any such satisfactory conclusion. Instead, as if in rebuke to the fatuity of the sentiment, God cursed these gnarled, leathery old rockers to wander the earth from stadium to stadium forever t-t-t-t-talkin' 'bout their generation—as if baby boomers ever do anything else. It's unfortunate that Simon's subject matter (a notorious true crime on the eve of the Sixties), his take on it (we're all guilty), and a superficially nostalgic musical expression of it (lots of doo-wop) risk tarring him with the same brush. I don't think Simon is t-t-t-t-talkin' 'bout his generation so much as trying to escape it.

About a decade ago, I asked him, after some days of thoughtful conversation on all manner of subjects, whether he still considered rock music a form that enabled him to say everything he wanted to. Yes, he insisted, somewhat aggressively. He had praised the doo-wop he'd heard on New York street corners as a child—scratch a capella groups with incredible harmonic sophistication—and had bristled when I'd suggested most rock fans of today would consider it hopelessly old-fashioned. A couple of days later, he was driving me over to Queens for a BBC documentary we were doing when the Moonglows or the Five Penguins or some such came on WCBS-FM: "There," he said, accusingly, turning it up. "Do you think *that*'s 'old fashioned'?" I was getting pretty irked myself by this time and countered by suggesting that cutting-edge rock stars shouldn't really be listening to the oldies station. He punched the button and some gangsta rap came on. "Kids today," he sighed. "It's all about instant gratification. That's the perfect soundtrack for it." And then he switched back to WCBS. Musically, Simon has more in common with Gershwin than with Snoop Doggy Dogg.

When I reminded him of my question a couple of months ago, he gave me a different answer: now, rock songs, albums, touring weren't enough. He didn't want to be one of those dismal figures singing songs that bored him to loyal audiences who didn't want to hear anything else. On the other hand, the theater—the Broadway of *Cats* and *Guys and Dolls* and even *Rent*—obviously bores him, too. I don't know who started the theory of the boomers' historic inevitability—presumably at some summit in the Sixties John Lennon told Richard Rodgers, "Your grandchildren will live under rock 'n' roll"—but clearly Simon doesn't quite fit in, any more than do other recent musical theater newcomers such as Billy Joel, Jimmy Buffett, Pete Townshend, and Randy Newman. They've wound up here by default—because, for aging pop stars who don't fit any current radio formats and don't want to spend the rest of their lives competing with this year's Spice Girls, there's nowhere else to go.

Still, Paul Simon's rocky road to Broadway is a reminder of just how uniquely resistant the American musical theater is to change. Disdaining Broadway expertise, he eventually, after a couple of sackings, settled on Morris as director. But Morris seemed to have a hard time telling the story, so, a few weeks before opening, the show passed (unofficially) into the hands of Jerry Zaks, Mister Broadway himself. Zaks specializes in grisly cartoon travesties of well-loved shows, like the recent *Guys and Dolls* revival. His credo is: louder, faster, funnier, coarser, crasser . . . If you had to devise an exquisite punishment for a notorious "control freak," delivering him up unto Zaks would be it. The result is that, after wandering round town trashing mainstream Broadway for months on end, Simon now finds himself in what must be his worst nightmare: the score he worked on for eight years is trapped in the kind of plastic, generic Broadway staging he's always despised.

The facts of the case itself are simple enough: one summer night thirty years ago, a Puerto Rican gang called the Vampires swooped down on a West 45th Street playground in a revenge attack for the

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beating of one of their members. One Vampire, sixteen-year-old Sal, managed to stab and kill two white boys, and wound up sentenced to fry. For this oddly unappealing little story, Simon's starting point was the music. Before he had a text or even a plot structure, he had sounds. (Don't knock it; it worked for Verdi.) He began with rhythms, vocal harmonies, backing tracks, and, only when he was content with those, did he venture into melody and then, with Walcott, lyrics. In recent months, the cattier types around Broadway have recounted various snide accounts of *Capeman* runthroughs, after which Simon, oblivious to the fact that Act Two has no book and the staging is entirely inept, hectors the conductor for an hour and a half because the tambourine is too loud. Simon, poor schmuck, was taking the designation "musical" at face value. These days, most shows come at it from the opposite end. I've lost count of the number of producers who've said to me, well, the songs are pretty dreary and the play isn't much, but by the time Jerry Zaks/Hal Prince/Tommy Tune (delete as unavailable) comes on board with a terrific director's concept no one will notice. Similarly, the drama critic of *The New Yorker*, John Lahr, has many shrewd insights, but in his raves a pattern is beginning to emerge: he hails *Ragtime* or *The Lion King* as a landmark celebration of all that's best in the American theater etc., and then, about seven-eighths of the way through, concedes that, okay, the music's barely serviceable and the lyrics are feeble. The musically deficient musical has been the curse of Broadway for thirty years, and yet our critics still don't (as the president likes to say) get it. Seventy years on, we're not interested in *Show Boat* because it had a great boat.

Simon's perfectionism has paid off to this extent: close your eyes and the orchestrations are amazing—not just Oscar Hernandez's exuberant, explosive horn charts, but the subtler, supporting work of Stanley Silverman's strings. They reminded me of Oscar Hammerstein's marvelous second line to "Shall We Dance?": "On a bright cloud of music, shall we *fly*?" *The Capeman*'s orchestrations have the brightest cloud of music you ever heard, but what's on stage never really flies.

E. Y. Harburg, lyricist of *The Wizard of Oz*, used to say that music makes you feel a feeling, words make you think a thought, but a song makes you feel a thought. On the whole, Simon's approach to this story is stronger on feeling than thought. In the build-up to the killing, the music—melodically and harmonically extended versions of Fifties pop forms—is innocent, joyous, beguiling, suffused with wonder. Bob Crowley, a designer better known to London audiences for his work with the National and the RSC, produces some stage pictures to match—like the thrillingly upended tenements, tilted to reveal the tiny patch of blue sky on a satin summer night, as Sal and his pals lie on the fire escape and contemplate the pleasures ahead. It's a heady, giddy sequence, when song, staging, and emotion are all in sync, and it represents (though we don't yet know it) the show's high point. The music is sweet, seductive, propulsive, urging us on, carrying us away—and isn't that just what happened to Sal Agron in those few fatal seconds of that summer night? If Simon simply wanted to convey the paradox of childhood—that in innocence can lurk great evil—then he's done it very effectively.

The trouble is that on top of the rhythms come the words:

> Well, I entered the courtroom
> State of New York, County of New York
> Just some spic they scrubbed off the sidewalk
> Guilty by my dress
> Guilty in the press . . .

Ah, the patness of rhyme. As everyone knows, Sal isn't guilty because of the press/ Or his dress/ Or his Hispanic-ness/ Or his lack of politesse, but because . . . he did it. If this were the character speaking, we could forgive it as just the usual hoodlum self-justification. But it's not the character, it's the

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authors: the giveaway is that jarring "dress," which is not a word the real, uneducated Sal would have used except in the sense of "frock." But these guys never let up. Watching the character of young Sal is his older, supposedly redeemed self, played by Ruben Blades:

> A Spanish boy could be killed every night
> of the week
> But just let some white boy die
> And the world goes crazy for blood
> Latin blood . . .

I see. So middle-aged Sal holds exactly the same views as adolescent Sal, huh? Let us grant that it is perfectly possible—that many of us never change our opinions between the ages of sixteen and forty-two. Let us also grant that, just as President Clinton was working in the Oval Office one day when he noticed a vast right-wing conspiracy bobbing away just below his waist, so too it was a white, racist society that twisted the knife into those two boys forty years ago. But, even if defensible as fact, it's indefensible as drama. If you have a protagonist who doesn't change, there's no journey, no arc, no drama; if, furthermore, his actions are all society's fault, there's no motivation, no character, nothing but a cipher. Into this dismally obvious pit falls Simon and Walcott's play.

To make a sweeping generalization about a forty-year career, Simon writes two kinds of songs: those that evoke the innocence of his own adolescence, and more subdued, contemplative stuff. The show, presumably unintentionally, reduces this to a schizophrenic caricature: Act One has most of the youthful zip, with young Sal played by charismatic pretty-boy Marc Anthony, who comes not to bury Simon but to praise him; in Act Two, old Sal predominates and, as played by weary, put-upon, dead-eyed Blades, buries Simon completely. Blades was a candidate in Panama's 1994 presidential election, and, on the evidence of this performance, is obviously some sort of Panamanian Al Gore. But he does hold the key to what attracted Simon and Walcott to Agron: a bundle of papers tied up with string which he carries around like a security blanket. It turns out that, after Eleanor Roosevelt and others got his death sentence commuted to life, the illiterate Sal taught himself how to write poetry. The theory that a prisoner who takes to writing is more worthy of forgiveness than one who sews mailbags or bashes out license plates is one which appeals, needless to say, exclusively to writers.

It would be hard put to find a duller prospect to sustain an evening's drama, but even so the *Capeman* team manages to make matters worse. Simon, Walcott, and Morris are all talented men, but it's their storytelling that fails them every time. A small example: there is a comic song for the gang members two-thirds of the way through Act One called "Shopliftin' Clothes"—a self-explanatory title. It's like something Lieber and Stoller might have written for the Coasters, it gets a laugh and it comes a couple of numbers before the murders. Compare that with the comic song in that *other* Puerto Rican gang musical, *West Side Story*. "Gee, Officer Krupke" comes *after* the murders: the punks are in real trouble but they distance themselves from what's happened by baiting the police. Arthur Laurents, *West Side*'s author, felt the show needed a comic moment to build the dramatic tension, and he also felt it was true: kids kid around in such situations. But he sold it to his collaborators by citing the porters in Shakespeare—an argument high-toned enough to sneak past Jerome Robbins, Leonard Bernstein, and Stephen Sondheim. Laurents and Shakespeare are right: the comedy works because it's in a tense dramatic situation—that's its justification. It was repositioned in the movie and reduced to the level of *The Capeman*'s funny song—*just* a funny song. I can't think of a better comment on where Simon's show goes wrong than what Laurents said to me in defense of "Officer Krupke" a few years back: "Dramatically it's tiresome when

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you're in a sober, serious situation and you have sober, serious dialogue and music. The audience is way ahead. But writers think if someone comes out with this enormous kvetch it makes it important. It doesn't. It lacks wit, it lacks attitude, it's all so obvious." Which is exactly what I was thinking when, for the umpteenth time, Sal wandered into the wings plaintively bleating, "But I'm not the only one to blame."

This is not to say *The Capeman* needed to be turned into a conventional Broadway show. That's simply not possible with this composer. To understand Jerry Zaks's problem, you can pick almost any Simon lines at random. But take, say, an early hit like "Homeward Bound":

> I'm sitting in a railway station
> Got a ticket for my destination. . . .

How do you stage that? Show a railway station, with a seat, and a guy sitting on it, holding a ticket? The narrative is so strong, the images are so precise and evocative, it's hard to see what's to gain by planting it in a proper dramatic setting and literally illustrating it. It needs a different kind of approach, yet numbing literalism is all Zaks can offer. On Simon's recent *Capeman* album, my favorite number was "Trailways Bus." Sal's skipped jail and is heading cross-country to Arizona:

> Over the crest of the mountain
> The moon begins its climb
> And he wakes to find
> He's in rolling farmland. . . .

It's a peach of a song, but I asked Simon how on earth you'd use it in the show—it's not a scene, it's a *description* of a scene. He explained to me that it's sung by St. Lazarus, who's sitting behind Sal on the bus, as they head for a rendezvous with redemption in the desert. Gee, I thought, or possibly even Wow. But, a week before opening, Zaks cut the song from the show, and now the Lazarus figure makes no sense whatsoever, intermittently lurching in and out of the plot like a gibbering derelict on the subway.

In place of the cut songs, Simon and Walcott have been prevailed upon to write some direct conversational recitative, which teeters alarmingly on the Lloyd Webberish. Even worse, although the score is through-composed and Simon's numbers mostly end as quietly and understatedly as they do on his albums, the production puts in a couple of dozen applause points. But they generate only fitful applause and, in those near-silent gaps, all the dramatic energy bleeds away. The worst examples are what would quaintly be called the first- and second-act finales, both of which are so indeterminate that the audience fails to recognize them as finales at all until the house lights go up and the ushers open the exit doors.

I reviewed *Ragtime*'s Toronto tryout in these pages a year ago (February 1997), and, despite all the groaning defects I painstakingly pointed out, the guys have pretty much left it alone. So then will I—except to salute its Broadway home, the new Ford Center (crummy name, fabulous theater, built in the shells of the old Lyric and Apollo on 42nd Street), and to note that it stands in sober contrast to *Capeman*. Both shows are about killers: the Capeman stabs two white boys; *Ragtime*'s Coalhouse Walker, Jr., a black pianist, kills half the volunteer firemen of New Rochelle and a goodly proportion of their neighbors. Yet, while *The Capeman* has attracted pickets objecting to the "glorification" of a murderer, at the finale of *Ragtime* the audience cheers Coalhouse to the rafters—even though most of them come from New Rochelle and its sister suburbs, and, were Brian Stokes Mitchell (who plays Coalhouse) to stroll toward them down one of their shady avenues, a sizable percentage would take the precaution of crossing the street. Part of the difference in reaction is due to the circumstances: the Capeman is a real killer from 1959, Coalhouse a fictional one from the turn of the century. Besides, for better or worse, there is no consensus

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on Hispanic "suffering" at least to the extent that middle-class white audiences do not reflexively feel guilty about them. Nonetheless, whatever the logic of that position, 90 percent of Coalhouse's ovation is due to the sort of glib show-biz manipulation Simon eschews. Being black, for example, Coalhouse gets all the soulful, yearning, ersatz-gospel power ballads about riding through life on "The Wheels of a Dream." In other words, he's been oomphed up into a conventional musical theater ovation-provoker. For those of us who like the journalistic detachment of E. L. Doctorow's original novel, that's not necessarily an improvement. Like almost everything about *Ragtime*, it's undeniably effective, but mainly in the sense of a triple-strength laxative: it passes through you and leaves no trace.

As staged by Steppenwolf's Frank Galati and Graciela Daniele, *Ragtime* is as professional as the modern musical gets. But it isn't worth it. Close your eyes this time and the epic sweep of the play collapses in the derivative weediness of the score. In *Ragtime*, as in Sondheim, the characters, instead of revealing their feelings, analyze them. E. L. Doctorow deserves a better score; Paul Simon deserves a better show. But both *Ragtime* and *The Capeman* are symptoms of the same problem: what's the point of a musical theater that's no longer very musical? Broadway producers can go on lavishing millions of dollars in staging expertise on disguising feeble scores like *Ragtime*'s. Or they could give some thought to devising different kinds of storytelling that might accommodate outsiders like Simon. In the long run, that's the better bet.

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Art

Frankenthaler at the Guggenheim

by Karen Wilkin

There's a whole litany of quotations and anecdotes permanently lodged in the brain of anyone who has ever studied art history, truisms that gladden the hearts and ease the jobs of people who write gallery guides and museum press releases. Some of these tags are so tidy that you might feel justified in dismissing them as apocryphal if they weren't so well documented. There is Cézanne's recommendation that painters "treat nature by the cylinder, the sphere, the cone"; Picasso's assertion that "nature and art, being two different things, cannot be the same thing"; and Mies van der Rohe's authoritative declaration that "less is more." Everyone knows that Ruskin accused Whistler of "flinging a pot of paint in the public's face," and that Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase* was described as "an explosion in a shingle factory." The most illuminating of these useful snippets are the stories about pivotal moments in an artist's evolution or in the development of an entire movement. Take, for example, the twenty-year-old Stuart Davis's resolve to become a "Modern Artist" (his capitals) after seeing the 1913 Armory Show, or the young David Smith's move to sculptures in welded steel—the first ever made in the U.S.—after seeing photographs of Picasso's and González's pioneering metal constructions in a French art magazine. Closer to our own day is the familiar tale about a couple of aspiring young painters from Washington, D.C., Kenneth Noland and Morris Louis, who early in 1953 visited the New York studio of an even younger Helen Frankenthaler and saw a remarkable picture that she had painted the previous fall, when she was twenty-three; they found that canvas, *Mountains and Sea* (1952), so stimulating that Louis later described Frankenthaler as "the bridge between Pollock and what was possible."

Anyone interested in recent American art has heard this story more than once, and *Mountains and Sea*, with its luminous hues, diaphanous shapes, and detached fragments of line, has become a kind of icon, regarded as the *Urtext* of stain painting because of the way Frankenthaler disembodied color by physically merging thinned-out pigment with the very fabric of the canvas. At once landscapelike and wholly about the way paint responds to the gestures of a particular individual, at once flat and spatially suggestive, *Mountains and Sea* issued a challenge to the wet-into-wet, dragged paint-handling and loaded surfaces that were the hallmarks of ambitious abstraction at the start of the 1950s. *Mountains and Sea* was startling when it was first painted and, as anyone can attest who visited the picture in the past few years at the National Gallery, Washington (where it has been on long-term loan from the artist), it continues to look astonishingly fresh, bold, and inventive.

There's no doubt that this now legendary picture significantly influenced the direction

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Louis's and Noland's work took after their crucial New York visit. *Mountains and Sea* served as a catalyst for their own inventions, functioning as both a model and a point of departure for their pursuit of "what was possible"—which proved to be, for each of them, a highly personal brand of "cool" abstraction based on clean-edged zones of thinly applied, richly orchestrated colors. But in a real sense, *Mountains and Sea* was just as significant to the future development of Frankenthaler's own art as it was to Noland's and Louis's. Or it might be more accurate to say that it turned out to be prophetic of the path she would follow.

I suspect that Frankenthaler was as surprised by the picture as anyone, since its loose gathering of floating, overscaled lines and pools of limpid, translucent color didn't look like anything she had done before on canvas. In fact, it didn't look much like anything almost *anyone* had done before on canvas. (More about that later.) But there's nothing tentative or hesitant about the picture. Quite the contrary. For all its delicacy and the fragility of its tender, rococo palette, *Mountains and Sea* is painted with a sure and uncompromising, albeit flexible, hand. What's especially admirable is that Frankenthaler had not only the acuity and good sense to recognize that she had done something out of the ordinary (or to believe whoever told her she had, which is almost the same thing), but also the guts to leave her eccentric picture alone. Most young painters, even young painters as precocious and visually sophisticated as the well-educated, well-traveled Frankenthaler, would have been frightened or frustrated by producing something that didn't correspond to even the most advanced of existing norms; most young painters would have alleviated their discomfort by continuing to work until their picture resembled something they already knew and admired.

The story of Frankenthaler's response to *Mountains and Sea* is told by the paintings she produced in the course of the 1950s, a body of original, adventurous work that still forms the bedrock of her formidable international reputation. Yet despite the importance of these early paintings to Frankenthaler's mature *oeuvre*, it hasn't been easy to see them. The last time it was possible to study Frankenthaler's formative years in depth was in 1981, when Carl Belz, then director of the Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, mounted a comprehensive survey of her paintings of the 1950s, a splendid show that those of us who trekked to Waltham, Massachusetts, still talk about with pleasure. About half a dozen pictures from this early period figured in the Frankenthaler retrospective organized by the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth and seen at New York's MOMA in 1989, but that's been about it—until this January. Happily, a wonderful, tightly focused exhibition, "After *Mountains and Sea*: Frankenthaler 1956–1959," will remain at the uptown Guggenheim through April.[1]

Deliberately less comprehensive than the Brandeis show, "After *Mountains and Sea*" consists of about fourteen canvases representating the ways in which the energetic young artist explored the implications of her "breakthrough" painting. Some are familiar to experienced Frankenthaler-watchers from the occasional show or from Barbara Rose's valuable 1972 monograph and John Elderfield's insightful 1989 study of the artist's work. The balance of the Guggenheim's exhibition is made up of less well-known but telling pictures that help to round out our sense of what this prodigiously talented young woman achieved before she was out of her twenties.

The show begins, obviously, with *Mountains and Sea*. In any other Frankenthaler exhibition, the picture might have been a starting point simply because of when it was

1 "After *Mountains and Sea*: Frankenthaler 1956–1959" opened at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, on January 16, 1998, and remains on view through May 3. A catalogue of the exhibition, with essays by Julia Brown and Susan Cross, has been published by the Guggenheim Museum and distributed by Harry N. Abrams (96 pages, $39.95).

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done or because of its evident aesthetic merits. At the Guggenheim, it's clear that *Mountains and Sea* both declares the young painter's individuality and sums up her formation. It not only announces the presence of a distinctive new voice, but it reminds you of what shaped Frankenthaler. The lyricism, generous scale, and authority of *Mountains and Sea* point to what the young painter would become. At the same time, the painting encapsulates her curiosity about a wide range of modernist traditions and demonstrates her understanding of the concerns of New York's most adventurous painters of the period. Everyone who has discussed the picture has noted that its ambiguous, shifting space is at once reminiscent of the complex pulse of Cubist planes against the surface of the canvas and evocative of the landscape forms that Frankenthaler memorably described as being "in her arms" when she painted the picture. (She had just returned from a trip to Nova Scotia.) The painter's familiarity with Miró, Kandinsky, and late-Cubist Picasso has been frequently discussed, as has her rigorous grounding in Cubist construction, a background acquired through her studies with Paul Feeley at Bennington College, as well as, briefly, with Wallace Harrison (the Australian-born painter, not the architect) in New York and, even more briefly, with Hans Hofmann in Provincetown.

It has all been thoroughly itemized: the young woman's close friendship with Clement Greenberg; her getting to know, through him, the most significant members of the Abstract Expressionist generation; the effect of seeing their work in the company of their most perceptive and articulate critic; and so on. Frankenthaler is well aware of her good fortune in having been immersed in the exciting New York art world of the 1950s, but it wasn't only good fortune that allowed her to profit from the experience. She may deserve credit for having had the talent and the wit to grasp the implications of what she was confronted with when she was plunged into the center of New York's vanguard art world, but she was well prepared, thanks to her formal studies and the time she spent in museums. And you have to admire her sheer chutzpah.

Frankenthaler's earliest works—pre-*Mountains and Sea*—reveal her pitting herself against the artists she admired most, trying on for size, among other things, Picasso's simplifications and distortions, Gorky's haunting, mysterious forms, and de Kooning's wrenched planes, adapting them all to her own needs. Frankenthaler's natural fluency in drawing—her unmistakable "wrist"—made de Kooning an obvious model for her, as he was for many ambitious artists of her generation; her earliest works demonstrate that she quickly "got" what he had to offer. She was puzzled, at first, by Pollock but soon realized, she has said, that while you could become a "disciple of de Kooning," you could "depart from Pollock." In *Mountains and Sea*, Frankenthaler did just that, using his method of pouring paint onto an unprimed surface, the canvas spread on the studio floor so that it could be approached from all directions; but instead of emulating Pollock's web of delicate dripped and poured lines, instead of coiling skeins of paint on themselves, as he did, to make a shimmering expanse at once confrontational and insubstantial, Frankenthaler made drawing and painting into a single activity, soaking thinned-out pigment into the canvas as both line and plane at the same time. It seemed as though her drawing gesture had somehow expanded effortlessly into sheets of radiant color.

Pollock pointed the way. Without his example, it seems probable that Frankenthaler might have taken a different direction in the 1950s. She might never even have made *Mountains and Sea*. But it's also true that she made use of things already present in her own work when she painted her now celebrated picture—things already present, however, not in her canvases, but in her works on paper. Working on paper, in a wide variety of media, was extremely important to Frankenthaler at the start of her career—as it still is. Then as now, she used

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paper for its own qualities, not as a preparation for working in other media; before *Mountains and Sea*, some of her most accomplished—and largest—early pictures were realized in gouache, watercolor, charcoal, and crayon on photographer's backdrop paper. Frankenthaler clearly enjoyed the uninhibiting effect of paper and exploited the way it encouraged fluid gestures and permitted a particular brilliance of color. Then as now, when traveling she frequently made watercolors, working freely from nature—which was how the Nova Scotia landscape got "into her arms" in the fall of 1952.

In *Mountains and Sea*, Frankenthaler translated the immediacy, fluidity, and luminosity of watercolor into the scale and intensity of oil on canvas. In doing so, she gave herself (and as it turned out, a fair number of other people) a new syntax of painting, but the thinness and radiance of her color weren't entirely unprecedented, nor was the directness of her result. Among the Abstract Expressionist generation, Gorky's melting forms and halos of color, along with Gottlieb's and Rothko's barely inflected expanses of delicate hues, can be cited as anticipating Frankenthaler's approach. An even more obvious (and potent) source is Matisse, who as early as 1912 made large paintings notable for their thin, brushy expanses of translucent, brilliant color. Even though it was evident that Matisse intended them as complete, resolved works of art, and even though they were in fact executed with the same ferocious deliberation as the rest of his work, his paintings of this type seemed to have been made in a single, brief, energetic campaign, as though they were oversized color *esquisses*—rapidly executed, sketchy studies traditionally meant to be worked up into denser, more solidly executed *tableaux*. Matisse made works of this sort at intervals for the rest of his life, even resorting to washing off the entire painted surface after a day's work, in order to preserve the illusion of freshness and transparency in the finished picture over the long period of its gestation. Frankenthaler was certainly well aware of these precedents, which served as both inspiration and confirmation of what she was doing, but her own working method—and hence the appearance of the work—was very much her own.

Part of the originality of *Mountains and Sea* and the works that followed lay in the way Frankenthaler flirted with reference, allowing her spreading stains of color to look unequivocally like themselves and, at the same time, to evoke forms in nature, just as she allowed the paint-soaked surface of the canvas to assert the uninterrupted flatness of the surface and, at the same time, to suggest landscape space. In the works she made immediately following *Mountains and Sea*, Frankenthaler continued to test the possibilities of staining, but most of her paintings of the early 1950s were darker and denser, and less watercolorlike. By 1956, however, she had fully come to terms with her discovery, and was able to spend the next years exploring the permutations of her new fluid pictorial language—which is why the Guggenheim show concentrates on 1956 through 1959. The exhibited works are urgent, passionate pictures, vivid evidence of the power of informed intuition, amalgams of Cubist fundamentals, biomorphic abstraction, fragmented recollections, and direct observation.

While Frankenthaler's ability to invent unnameable hues and orchestrate resonant combinations of color in these paintings is both admirable and striking, perhaps the most striking thing about the show is the range of both the appearance and the emotional temperature of its fourteen or so canvases. *Jacob's Ladder* (1957, Museum of Modern Art, New York), for example, is like the ghost of a Cubist construction. The lower two-thirds of the canvas is haunted by densely packed planes of warm, glowing color, their heat tempered by the unifying presence of white canvas shining through the thinned-out paint; as we watch, the casual grid dematerializes, turning into a series of transparent, overlapping stains,

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before erupting in a splatter of nacreous rose above. It's Cubism disembodied, blown apart, translated into pure emotion and pure optical experience. Freed of the last vestige of illusionism, it's still capable of making us think about pulsating volumes. ("I never start out only with color," Frankenthaler has said. "I start out as a space-maker on a flat thing with four corners.")

In *Interior* (1957, private collection), by contrast, Frankenthaler makes her spreading pours and emphatic strokes momentarily coalesce into a glimpse of a room, complete with chair, table, and a painting on the wall—unless it is a window opening onto a landscape. The mood is southern, almost tropical. *Interior* is one of the solidest paintings of this period and one of the most unstable; however potent the evocation of place, the picture threatens to dissolve into pure, sensuous color relationships if you relax your attention to its allusions for a moment. *Basque Beach* (1958, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.) is redolent of sun and sea, of outdoor dazzle and unbounded space, transubstantiated into exuberantly manipulated clashes of intense yellow and radiant blues. The sense of the outdoors and of pleasure is palpable, but not depicted. Was Frankenthaler daydreaming of private joys?

As with *Mountains and Sea*, *Basque Beach*'s imagery seems not so much intended as discovered, as if the artist's feelings (or her memories) had determined the flow of paint without her willing it. At times, it seems as though she watched the seed of an image evolve without consciously directing it and then allowed the reference to become more explicit. Frankenthaler's after-the-fact titles often seem to acknowledge her recognition of such associations. In *Eden* (1956, private collection), for example, long vertical sweeps measure off the surface of the canvas, asserting its expanse and proportions, and stabilizing a series of irregular rounded shapes; the title makes us read these verticals as vaguely treelike and briefly turn a yellow splash into a schematic sun—a kind of idyllic landscape?—before everything returns to being a series of ecstatic gestures made with a surprising variety of colors.

Such fleeting images flicker in and out of Frankenthaler's abstractions, like syncopated visions snatched from memory. Yet other elements seem purely willful, as though the young painter were doing nothing more complex than assertively declaring her presence: take *Eden*'s bold, red handprint and its insistent, scrawled repetitions of the perfect score, "100"; or the playfully tallied and cancelled numbers—one through six—in the ravishing *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1957, private collection). At the other end of the spectrum is the monochrome gray *New York Bamboo* (1957, private collection), a spare, reticent picture that pays homage to classical Chinese painting before dissolving into a series of widely dispersed characteristically "Frankenthaler" gestures.

The young painter's forceful personality is manifest in each of these pictures, but it's clear that she had no single approach, no recipe for making a painting. Each seems freshly conceived, or, rather, freshly discovered. (When Frankenthaler keeps worrying at a picture, it can sometimes sink under the weight of her revisions.) What is also clear is that her sense of what a picture can be differs strikingly from that of the abstract color painters, including Noland and Louis, for whom her early work proved so provocative. Unlike the deductive, dispassionate compositions of her colleagues, which reassert the proportions, dimensions, and unequivocal, literal flatness of the canvas itself, Frankenthaler's pictures are informed equally by modernist assertions of autonomy and traditional notions of reference. (This is a statement of fact, not a value judgment.) Her references, of course, are not illusionistic depictions, but elliptical, private, quasi-symbols that usually have their genesis in her manipulation of her materials. Like Louis and Noland, Frankenthaler stresses the clarity and the uniqueness of the single gesture, but that gesture is

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never an end in itself; it creates space, evokes a place, a person, an emotion. Sometimes, too, Frankenthaler's color patches and swoops of line are comments on other artists' work. She occasionally uses art that she admires as the basis for improvisation; at the Guggenheim, *Las Mayas* (1958, private collection) bears witness to her interest in the Metropolitan Museum's painting of women on a balcony, formerly attributed to Goya—yes, she has turned it upside down—while other pictures in the show enter into negotiations with, among other things, the sculptures of her friend David Smith.

Such connections are nicely discussed in the exhibition's copiously illustrated catalogue, which also includes a long interview with the artist by the show's curator, Julia Brown. Although all of the spontaneity of conversation seems to have been edited out, it is, nonetheless, full of interesting reminiscences and observations. Ms. Brown has contributed, too, a series of poetic, deeply felt, and thoughtful "notes on the early paintings of Helen Frankenthaler" titled "In Pursuit of Beauty." The third text, by Susan Cross, curatorial assistant, is a scrupulously researched historical essay that provides essential background and context for Frankenthaler's work of the 1950s. I wish Ms. Cross hadn't perpetuated some of the hoary, but not wholly accurate, legends of the period—she overestimates, for example, the influence of the European "artists in exile" on their American colleagues in the 1940s—but that's a quibble. And as a whole, the catalogue deals sensitively and intelligently with the issue of Frankenthaler's femaleness and how it affected the reception of her work.

It is, as they say, a vexed question. Paintings with the intensity, ambition, and sheer beauty of the best of Frankenthaler's works—to say nothing of their originality—would be noteworthy in any context. That they were painted by a woman in her twenties during a period dominated by a group of aggressively macho male artists makes these pictures all the more extraordinary. While Frankenthaler has been an important role model to many younger women, she has never made any of this an issue, refusing to allow herself to be co-opted by the feminists and resisting (rightly, in my view) the label of "woman artist." Even in her formative years, she thought of herself, she says, "as a painter among painters" and clearly was accepted as just that, even if a few of her first critics rather simple-mindedly equated her transparent color harmonies with "femininity." But it's worth pointing out that in Frankenthaler we have, for the first time in the history of Western art, a painter who is female for whom no excuses or qualifying remarks are necessary. In her own time, she's as good as the best and better than most. Period.

The Guggenheim exhibition makes it plain that Frankenthaler was that good from the start. Picture after picture in this well-chosen show is impressive for the inventiveness of its color, the unexpectedness of its composition, the delicacy and energy of its gestures, and the resonance of its elusive imagery. But what is perhaps most impressive is the manifest daring of these high-risk paintings. Frankenthaler's method allows no second-guessing, no way back. The most fragile mark, the most subtle passage of color demands full commitment. There's no place to hide, no way of undoing a shape or a gesture that goes wrong. Walking through the exhibition at the Guggenheim is like watching a young woman walk a very high wire. I don't mean the terrifying spectacle I remember from the circuses of my childhood, where everything was done to heighten a sense of imminent catastrophe. Frankenthaler downplays the danger, making everything look graceful and effortless. It's like one of Philippe Petit's virtuoso performances, an apparently impossible traverse executed with incredible concentration, seriousness, and sureness, so that it looks like not only the most important thing in the world, but also the most joyful and exalted. Fearlessness, youth, and exuberance resound in these wonderful pictures.

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Levelheaded mysticism: Arthur Dove at the Whitney

by Mario Naves

The painter Arthur Dove (1880–1946) is an artist whose work has not been much on view in New York in recent years. The lone watercolor or painting included in survey exhibitions has been intriguing, but also puzzling: seen piecemeal, Dove's work can seem remote. His painting *The Inn* (1942) was on view last year in a show at the Met honoring the collectors Edith and Milton Lowenthal. Yet viewed in the context of American modernism, the picture may as well have come from Mars. This is due not only to the singularity—one might say the solitariness—of Dove's art, but also to the fact that it isn't well known to a lot of us. To be sure, the name of Arthur Dove is likely to prompt vaguely recalled historical tidbits: that he was part of Stieglitz's circle; that he created collages which were, at the time, aesthetically radical; and that he may have been the first artist to paint a nonobjective painting. Dove has, in other words, entered the canon of art history. But when has that ever guaranteed a true understanding of an artist's accomplishment?

It is unexpected, then, that there are no fewer than four separate museum and gallery exhibitions devoted to Dove currently on view in Manhattan. (One of them pairs Dove's work with that of his wife, the painter Helen Torr.) Multiple and simultaneous shows are usually devoted to art-world hotshots, "major" artists whose work rarely deserves (or sustains) such attention. In contrast, the paintings of Arthur Dove seem the least likely candidates for such treatment. Their quietude is out of sync with the free-for-all of late twentieth-century culture. If the current focus can't be called "Dovemania" (these are, after all, paintings impervious to hype), the shows are nonetheless a welcome surprise. Indeed, they are more than that. The most important of these exhibitions, "Arthur Dove: A Retrospective" at the Whitney Museum of American Art, is the first comprehensive overview of Dove's *oeuvre* in twenty-two years.[1] It's about time, for the show is a revelation.

"Arthur Dove" traces the artist's career from the Fauvist-inspired *Still Life Against Flowered Wall Paper* (1909) to the monumental *Flat Surfaces* (1946), painted in the year of the artist's death. In between are al-

1 "Arthur Dove: A Retrospective" opened at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, on January 15, 1998, and remains on view through April 12. The exhibition was first seen at the Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C. (September 20, 1997–January 4, 1998), and it will travel to the Addison Gallery of American Art, Andover, Massachusetts (April 25–July 12, 1998) and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (August 2–October 4, 1998). A catalogue of the exhibition, with essays by Debra Bricker Balken, Elizabeth Hutton Turner, and William C. Agee, has been published by the Addison Gallery of American Art and the MIT Press in association with the Phillips Collection (196 pages, $35 paper).

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most forty years of unwavering commitment to a peculiar—and peculiarly American—vision. To understand Dove's work, one must look to his relationship with the European avant-garde and, more importantly, with the natural world. While it is possible to divine in his work traces of Futurism, Expressionism, Orphism, Klee, and Kandinsky, his art is beholden to none of them. Dove inherited modernist impulses less by direct influence, one feels, than by a process not dissimilar to osmosis. Dove was, to be certain, a cultured artist, but also an idiosyncratic one. Like many American artists, Dove made the ritual journey to France, but he spent most of his time there painting outside of Paris. Such an eccentric move suits a modern artist whose work can resemble the relics of some bygone age: Dove's evocations of natural forces—particularly his omnipotent, pulsating suns—are primordial and unhewn. He can, at times, seem like an inspired primitive. Dove puts me in mind of Clyfford Still, another homespun oddball whose paintings elude pigeonholing.

If there is one artist whose work Dove's can be likened to it is his friend Georgia O'Keeffe. Like O'Keeffe, he was what could be termed a Yankee mystic: a painter prone to big metaphors that were nonetheless modestly scaled and levelheaded. For Dove, nature was innately concrete. Clouds acquire the consistency of matzoh balls; sunlight has an almost sculptural presence. His depictions of nature can be ominous or inviting, but they are always deeply felt. Stating once that he would paint "the wind and a landscape chastised by the cyclone!" Dove had an uncanny empathy with natural phenomena, as well as a predilection for the mythic. If he did not find God in the rustle of leaves or in the mass of a geological formation, he did intuit a preternatural vitality informing them. Yet there is nothing brittle about his symbolism. Having supported himself for a time as a farmer, Dove's metaphysical tendencies were tempered by pragmatism. In both life and art, Dove was not afraid of getting his hands dirty.

Unlike O'Keeffe, Dove was able to make his images connect as painting. Before committing an image to canvas, Dove would make watercolor sketches of a particular site which would later be transferred to a larger format with the aid of a pantograph. This may seem a contrived strategy, especially for an artist as "natural" as Dove. But it is interesting to note the differences between the sketches and finished paintings. The watercolors are filled with the offhand joy taken in the quick impression. Dove clearly loved the way a wet brush took to the tooth of the paper; these painterly "drags" give the sketches their crispness. Yet as lovely as they are, the watercolors don't have the authority of the oil paintings. With oils, Dove's pace became measured and his energies concentrated. Consequently, the images acquired a density, both thematically and aesthetically. The gathering of brushstrokes that makes up *Penetration* (1924), for instance, is as loving as it is meditative. The physicality of oils gives Dove's art a gravity that the sketches lack.

If Dove did not have an innate gift for oil paints as he did with watercolor, his unadorned style of paint-handling was a perfect match for his imagery. Has there ever been an artist whose formal vocabulary was as inelegant? The knotty vegetablelike shapes that parade across *October* (1935) bump up against each other with a clumsy élan. The craggy monoliths that dominate *Long Island* (1940) appear almost cartoonish, yet maintain a certain dignity. In Dove's paintings, nature is simplified, not stylized. His shapes are often recognizable, but rarely predictable, and the relationships between them are characterized by a nudging tension. They are paintings about the awkwardness of an object or event coming into being. I can't make heads or tails of the forms in *Summer* (1935), for example, but the manner in which they interact has a blunt drama to it. Admittedly, Dove's compositions aren't always as tight as they could be. Often they feel lumped together or are oddly cropped within the painting's format.

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Yet, even when a particular composition falls flat, it has a specificity that rings true. There isn't an arbitrary moment to be found in his paintings. They are the generalizations of an artist keenly attuned to the particulars of the world around him.

Which is not to say that his work altogether avoids the cornball. Sometimes Dove's symbolic shorthand seems rote. The squiggles cascading through *Seagull Motif (Violet and Green)* (1928), for instance, are cloying. I remain unimpressed with the collages, which seem more the souvenirs of nature walks than full-bodied works of art. Likewise, the argument around whether or not Dove was the first artist to create an abstract picture is beside the point. While the question of who got there first may have import for those who like to nitpick over the innovations of twentieth-century art, the fact remains that, even at his most visionary, Dove never became a wholly abstract artist. Even the fine series of works titled *Abstraction* painted circa 1910 are fairly blatant representations of landscape. (The one exception is *Abstraction No. 2*, a shockingly lucid work that almost ninety years later still packs a wallop.) Dove's recognition as an artist should be predicated on the quality of his work, not on his role as innovator.

Dove's masterly color sense is irrefutable. Although his *oeuvre* is not without its moments of brash color, on the whole it is subdued. The word "muted" goes some way toward describing his palette, but gives little indication of its overall impact. For Dove did not simply put colors together well—he created chromatic experiences. Dove's colors and the queer, filtered light that emanates from them have a warmth that adds to the work's otherworldly stoicism. The way in which the dusky pinks and reds frame the luminous central form of *Formation I* (1943) is nothing short of magical. Similarly, the acidic yellow light of *Golden Sun* (1937) has an immensity that belies the painting's size, a mere 9 3/4 by 13 3/4 inches. Throughout his career Dove experimented with a variety of painting media, and the technical knowledge garnered from such experiments afforded him the best means to achieve the color sensation he wanted. Again, this may seem like calculation, but no amount of conscious manipulation could account for the spooky vigor of Dove's paintings.

What, then, are we to make of this humble eccentric? To state that he was an original is true enough and a banality. Fairfield Porter wrote that the "original" artist's "denial of tradition and of the [artistic] capital are equivalent to . . . a declaration of an amateur status." Perhaps. Dove's vision certainly had something of the amateur's wide-eyed wonder, but that doesn't make him a crank or make his art marginal. In fact, Dove's paintings are a salutary reminder that the history of early American modernism is, contrary to myth, not wanting for major artists. Is it possible that paintings as hushed as these will make a dent in our hyperkinetic era of virtual realities and virtual art? That such a splendid—and, ultimately, moving—exhibition is now on view should give pause to those who have all but given in to such manifestations of cultural cynicism. For, in the end, "Arthur Dove: A Retrospective" is nothing less than a gift.

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The media

Down on Clinton

by James Bowman

What a gloriously happy month it has been for the news media! Not only have they had their way with quantities of titillating details of the Clinton sex scandal—each of them yielding up its secret but reluctantly to the seducer's touch—they have also had the sauce to pleasure afforded by their continual self-flagellation. Hardly had the news broken of Linda Tripp's recordings of Monica Lewinsky's confessions before conscience-stricken journalists were professing themselves sick of the whole business. "The scandal is less than a week old," wrote Linton Weeks in the Style section of *The Washington Post*, "but already a quiet disgust is spreading across the land. In the face of a round-the-clock onslaught of tidbits and titillations, many Americans are eager to learn the truth. But the unsavory details are giving them heartburn."

On the same page, Tom Shales, the *Post*'s bigfoot TV critic, weighed in with a similar complaint. "Here we are again at rock bottom," he wrote. "Looks kind of familiar down here, doesn't it? Someday we may find there's no crawling out again." His evidence for this lamentable degradation was that "once more, as seems to be happening with greater frequency, the lead story on 'Inside Edition' and 'Hard Copy' is the same as the lead story on 'The CBS Evening News'!" Shales was particularly exercised that TV news-chat shows were interviewing the Internet gossip-monger Matt Drudge, "as sleazy-looking a character as anyone involved in the case so far (and that is saying something)"—a man who "has no credentials whatever to serve on a panel with professional journalists or even professional pundits. His only credential is his computer."

Ouch! As one whose only credential is his computer, I feel properly chastened. Clearly, I, too, can at best hope for a more harmless Drudge's sort of tawdry notoriety and can never be honored with the bays of the "professional," journalist or pundit. I knew there was some reason I should have had resort to that nurse of scholars and philosophers, the journalism school. "Drudge's sudden rise to fame," wrote Shales in disgust, "and now [Tim] Russert's implied endorsement of him, may be but one small sign of the new electronic Tower of Babel that the Internet will become." Nor was his viewing-with-alarm merely idiosyncratic. It was the same on the *Post*'s news pages, where Dan Balz wrote that

> nothing compares to what the country has witnessed since the story first broke: the around-the-clock pursuit; the almost instantaneous reporting through outlets that didn't exist a decade ago; the commingling of fact, rumor and opinion and the ubiquity of talking heads; and the intense speculation about whether Clinton's presidency can survive, long before the facts have been established.

Here, at any rate, was material aplenty for

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the endless seminars and discussions, many of them already scheduled or in session, about media ethics, standards, biases, and so forth.

But even the viewers-with-alarm are now becoming professionals. What credentials, I would like to know, has Tom Shales got for writing in such alarmist terms about the future of journalism? After all, there are lots of trained professional alarmists being turned out every day by universities, think tanks, and foundations. And indeed we have seen much use made in the last month of these designated worriers—people like Larry Sabato of the University of Virginia, the author of the book that gave us one of our most useful new clichés, that of the Feeding Frenzy. Shales's colleague in the Style section, Howard Kurtz, cited Sabato the very next day as one of those "media critics, academics and journalists" who had sucked their thumbs and come to the conclusion that "the furious pace of the coverage of alleged sexual misconduct in the White House has all but shattered traditional media standards and opened the floodgates to a torrent of thinly sourced allegations and unrestrained speculation."

Sabato warned Kurtz that "the media are courting a backlash," but one wondered if the lash could be any more severe than the one they were applying to their own backs—at least on the evidence of the half-dozen or so journalistic colleagues involved in reporting the scandal and cited by Kurtz. Some thought they were being used by Kenneth Starr; others, that they were being forced into reporting salacious details by commercial pressures. "Your bosses say, 'My God, we'll look like we're behind,'" moaned James Warren, Washington bureau chief of the *Chicago Tribune*. Kurtz's own boss, Leonard Downie, Jr., executive editor of the *Post*, pleaded for indulgence on the grounds of that paper's remarkable restraint. "There are things we haven't put in the paper that are said to be on the tapes because we haven't been able to satisfy ourselves there is a reasonable chance they are on the tapes." Editors at the *Post* "worry a lot about being used by people with different agendas," he says, "and it's made us very cautious about certain things."

A particularly good illustration of this caution came from David Westin, president of ABC News, who told Kurtz that on the previous Saturday evening he had decided to spike Jackie Judd's story that Clinton and Miss Lewinsky were observed "in an intimate encounter" in the spring of 1996 by a Secret Service agent, or possibly a White House servant. He hadn't thought Miss Judd had "sufficient independent sources." But by Sunday morning "we gained more confirmation" and ABC reported the story—always alert to "the danger," as Westin put it, "that you can get ahead of the wave." Fortunately, although he was considerably ahead of the wave in this instance, few remembered the fact a week later. Perhaps it was the ephemeral nature of the medium which allowed it to escape most of the blame widely attached to *The Dallas Morning News* and *The Wall Street Journal* for reporting—later but still prematurely—the Secret Service agent and the White House servant stories respectively.

Even more assiduously than Howard Kurtz, Janny Scott of *The New York Times* kept up a running dialogue with the designated worriers. For example, Tom Rosenstiel, director of the Project for Excellence in Journalism of the Pew Foundation, told her that

> we've evolved to the point where information is such a commodity that now it's not unusual for news organizations to say, "Somebody else is reporting this, we don't know if it's true or not." . . . It really raises the issue of whether news organizations should report information they can't prove themselves, on the theory that the public would have heard about it anyway or whether your newscast or paper should only contain facts that you know or believe are true.

Like Kurtz, Miss Scott made much of the pressures of the "marketplace" which "has

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been transformed in recent years by such forces as the rise of the Internet and twenty-four-hour cable-television news, both of which have intensified the pressures under which news is gathered and accelerated the pace at which it is spread." Then she brought forth a second professional worrier, Bill Kovach, curator of the Nieman Foundation at Harvard, who confirmed that this development had affected journalistic standards:

> There was a time when there was a kind of standard that most journalists lived by that you had to verify a piece of information about which you had no real knowledge with at least one other source, maybe two. . . . But that day is gone in the competitive world. When Matt Drudge puts it up on the Internet and everyone in town is talking about it, it's difficult to resist at least trying to match what he's put out. So each judgment maker in each news organization is left to design his or her own standards.

So here is the question submitted by these worthies for our consideration: who is the villain of this latest White House scandal? Is it (a) Bill Clinton, (b) Kenneth Starr, (c) Monica Lewinsky, (d) Linda Tripp, or (e) none of the above? Answer: (e) none of the above. It's actually Matt Drudge! This was in fact very generous on the part of Janny Scott—a sort of professional courtesy to those who have, unlike Mr. Drudge, journalistic "credentials"—since her own paper, *The New York Times*, had stood out against the example not only of ABC and the New York tabloids and *The Dallas Morning News* but also of *The Washington Post*, the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and *The Wall Street Journal*, and had not run the "Caught in the Act" story at all. Except, that is, in Miss Scott's own account of what the other papers were doing. "The New York Times came close to publishing an article about the accusation then decided at the last minute not to do so. 'We worked very hard on this story and in the end we weren't sure what was true,' said Joseph Lelyveld, the executive editor of The Times."

Only Michael Kinsley in *Time* had a good word for poor old Drudge, sensibly pointing out that journalists, like everyone else, are capable of putting gossip to its proper uses. But in most quarters, Matt Drudge was the villain of the scandal's first week (that is, of course, the journalists' scandal; Linda Tripp, or possibly Lucianne Goldberg, was the villainess of that other, often less interesting scandal), while Michael Isikoff was the hero. Two days after the story broke, *The New York Times*'s new Public Lives (*sc.* "People") section made Isikoff the daily feature, emphasizing the fact that this was the second time a Clinton scandal scoop had been taken away from him by editorial timidity. "It was an investigative reporter's biggest nightmare," wrote Elisabeth Bumiller, "and worse, it was recurring." The first time it had happened to him with the Paula Jones story at *The Washington Post*. After a shouting match with the editors who killed the story on that occasion, he was suspended for a fortnight. Later he left the paper to join *Newsweek*—where it happened again with less explosive results. "The word from both him and his colleagues is that he managed to control his rage this time, even though he was angry with his editors."

His friends were said to compare Isikoff to "a cruise missile in pursuit of a story," and even his former editor at the *Post*, Bob Woodward, was quoted as saying, "he's like a junkyard dog." That's rather a backhanded compliment, isn't it?—junkyard dogs being bywords for meanness and not the bulldog reporter's tenacity. Still, I suppose some junkyard dogs must be bulldogs, and Isikoff's "rage," at least as famous among his colleagues as that of Ajax, may also be in question here. Though he was slighted by his editors again, it must have been some compensation that he was all over the television that first week, and was repeatedly given credit for the story, though it never ran as he had written it. *Newsweek* itself, interestingly, chose to cloak its embar-

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rassment at having spiked the story of the year by posting on the Internet later in the week what Miss Bumiller called "a play-by-play description of Mr. Isikoff's bagging of the story."

It was a good illustration of the way in which the story of presidential ill-behavior was often, especially at first, turned into a story about journalists—their pursuit and capture of the story, their fight for it against less scrupulous rivals and their much ballyhooed remorse at ever having pursued or captured in the first place anything so sordid and unworthy of their high calling. But whatever doubt there might have been about the value of his story, there was no doubt about Mr. Isikoff's status as journalist-hero for "bagging" it, and the ultimate accolade came with his invitation to appear not only on all the usual TV news shows but also as a guest on the "Late Show with David Letterman."

One thing about scandals in the news, however, is that a changing cast of heroes and villains helps to keep interest alive once the limited stock of facts has been exhausted. After a CNN "Town Meeting" called "Media Madness" on January 28 brought together Mike McCurry, Dan Rather, Ann McDaniel of *Newsweek*, Bill Maher of "Politically Incorrect," and the long-time Friend of Bill, CNN's president Richard Kaplan to cluck in unison about their profession, interest in the merely journalistic dimension of the story began to fade. True, Janny Scott had by no means abandoned her search for new and more ponderous professional worriers to peer gloomily into the future of journalism. Indeed, in a single front-page exclusive in the *Times* of February 1, she came up with a whole clutch of new ones. Sandra Mims Rowe, editor of the *Portland Oregonian* and president of the American Society of Newspaper Editors, said that "this is in many ways the most difficult story I've seen in 25 years in journalism." James V. Risser, a Pulitzer Prize winner and former Washington bureau chief of *The Des Moines Register*, ventured that "some of the media are out of control in covering this story." Danny Schechter, a former producer at ABC and CNN, and author of *The More You Watch the Less You Know* (Seven Stories Press), pointed out that "Everybody benefited by saturation coverage. The more channels, the more a sedated public will respond to this."

The more sedation, the more response? A curious sort of drug this is. Miss Scott herself must have been sedated by an overdose of journalistic viewing-with-alarm not to have remarked on the fact. But outside the pages of *The New York Times*, even journalists began to lose some of the intensity of their interest in fellow journalists and to cast about for heroes and villains closer to the original scandal. The obvious candidate for villain, Bill Clinton, was not available —not only because the media are temperamentally and ideologically sympathetic to him but also because he was, well, too obvious. The sophisticates of the journalistic community would feel their powers of understanding and perspicacity underemployed, to say the least, if they were merely to report what was evident to every bartender and hairdresser in the land, namely that the president is a cad and a sleaze. Besides, it would compromise their "objectivity"!

This is why, by the way, the late-night comedians were routinely much more brutal to Clinton and searching about the scandal than anything in the serious press. Brent Bozell of the Media Research Center, commenting on the First Lady's charge of a "vast right-wing conspiracy" at work in the accusations against her husband, said yes, he was a part of it, and "Jay Leno is our leader." Of course the obvious thing that high-minded people attempt to ignore is always meat and drink to a funnyman.

But even Leno and Letterman, who told more jokes about Clinton in two weeks than they did in the whole of last year, could not be uninfluenced by the press's reading of the scandal, which rather predictably came to settle on a consensus that,

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following the lead of the First Lady and other Clinton defenders, Kenneth Starr was the villain of the piece. He was variously accused of mere partisanship, of Big Brother tactics, and, most amusingly, of criminal behavior in leaking details of the scandal to the press. Of all the rich ironies of the press coverage of the scandal, this was perhaps the richest. The news media themselves simply could not exist without leaks and leakers, and never for a moment would have considered not reporting leaks, assuming there were any, they had got from Starr.

But then the "blame Starr" strategy of the White House worked so well because it appealed to the media on so many levels. First of all, it offered them a chance to demonstrate that even-handed "objectivity" of which they are so inordinately proud. Although the First Lady's "conspiracy" theories were absurd on their face, a transparent attempt to divert attention from the issue of the president's behavior, treating them seriously—or at least with a modicum of seriousness—was tantamount to a refutation of charges of "bias." Besides, conspiracy sells. Second, to blame Starr for leaking was also to blame themselves for repeating the leaks, and the media love to blame themselves. It is proof of moral earnestness and, ultimately, a blamelessness known only to the invincibly self-righteous. Third and most important, the focus on Starr allowed the wise heads of the punditry (to the ranks of which, of course, every reporter aspires) their sophistication about the "real" motivations behind an ostensibly straightforward criminal investigation. And, as an added bonus, this line of approach dovetailed nicely with a new admiration for Bill Clinton, confirmed by his rising opinion-poll ratings, as an almost legendary defier of political gravity. Such reporting must itself have influenced the otherwise incomprehensible poll numbers. Ordinary people, one must suppose, like to think of themselves as sophisticates, too.

The result was a whole nation in the grip of a legalism to match Clinton's own, the "responsible" press continuing to chant in unison with the president's men that there was "no proof" to charges of which proof was scarcely imaginable—hence the frantic groping in some quarters after an elusive and inherently improbable eyewitness among the White House staff. Yet a designated worrier like Richard Harwood of *The Washington Post* kept insisting on the importance of his doubt "that any media organization if hauled into court today could prove the story we have been reporting." Harwood's very high-minded conception of the Journalistic Profession requires a standard of proof that would be "probative" in a court of law. But there are *all* kinds of things we know—and need to know—that can never come up to these high standards, which were designed to safeguard those accused of crimes, not the tender ears of the great American public.

Not to believe, in the face of the facts as we know them, that there was hanky-panky of a particularly discreditable kind going on between Mr. Clinton and Miss Lewinsky would be to believe our president guilty of, as Othello said to Iago, "hypocrisy against the devil." Yet such are the ravages that intellectual self-conceit and bogus sophistication have wrought in journalistic common sense that very few voices were ever raised in the media to say as much. Among the honorable few may be mentioned Charles Krauthammer, who demolished the hypothesis that Miss Lewinsky had fantasized the whole thing. Kate O'Beirne of *National Review* added a characteristically witty footnote by pointing out that it was every young girl's fantasy to engage in hurried and furtive oral sex with a much older man who does not care for her. Michael Kelly, who, like Michael Isikoff, lost a job for being tough on the Clinton administration, put the latest scandal in its necessary context with a simple catalogue of the president's prevarications called "I Believe."

Above all there was the great Maureen Dowd of *The New York Times*, the savage irony of whose commentary will be

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remembered after the cause itself is forgotten. I was particularly struck by her open letter of apology to Clarence Thomas and an even more devastating piece in which she dared to hope that the president and the intern *were* "having sex," since the alternative was believing that she was giving him policy advice. Though generally inclined to agree with much in journalism's wearisome self-censure, I find that the sound of such voices among the baying pack does resonate with hope. For, *pace* Richard Harwood and all the other professional worriers, the social utility of journalism is not merely that it advances a story by uncovering new facts, still less that it serves as an adjunct of the courts in assembling a body of objective and unimpeachable evidence. Hard as it might be for today's professional journalist to hear it, his task is also to act as the voice of public outrage—so that the public, jaded by artificial hipness and sophistication, may once again come to understand what it should be outraged about.

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Books

Prague of a hundred towers

by Eric Ormsby

Many cities inspire affection, and a few inspire reverence, but Prague must be unique in prompting both sentiments, usually in equal measure. The reverence is easy to understand. Even the casual stroller in the Old City encounters within one small, walkable area a concentration of architectural splendor probably unparalleled in Europe. And yet, for all of Prague's built magnificence, there is something gritty in its goldenness. The city, or at least the older historical city, is intimate in a way in which, say, Paris or Rome or Jerusalem cannot be, and this intense, almost cozy feeling of familiarity binds its inhabitants uneasily together. Perhaps it is the oddity of the amalgam, the inherent and palpable tension between otherwordly majesty and this-worldly earthiness—between, as it were, the Prague of Mozart and the Prague of the Good Soldier Svejk—which excites other, less attractive reactions. Of the bitter sectarian fury which tormented Ireland, William Butler Yeats could write, with unsurpassed succinctness, "Great hatred, little room," and in Prague, too, there may dwell at times such an explosive sense of vehement feeling in a tiny, and savagely contested, space. But beyond obvious historical explanations Prague possesses a certain *genius loci* (a phrase dear to Prague-dwellers to explain their city's inimitable hold upon them), which is at once irresistible and fierce. "The little Mother has claws," Franz Kafka famously wrote of his hometown.

Now, with *Prague in Black and Gold*, Peter Demetz, an emeritus professor at Yale and a well-known authority on German literature, has taken on the immensely ambitious project of writing the first detailed political and cultural history in English of his native city from its legendary origins to the death of President Thomas Garrigue Masaryk in 1937.[1] It is a groundbreaking work and one that all future historians of Prague will be obliged to consult. Bilingual in Czech and German, the son of Catholic and Jewish parents, Demetz would seem to be singularly well qualified to undertake this task. Though he left Prague as an exile in 1949, Demetz has obviously remained in contact with Czech historical scholarship (such as it was under the Communist regime) and has thought deeply, and sometimes painfully, about the fortunes of his native land. His expertise in German literature from medieval times to the present gives him, as well, a privileged perspective on Czech history and culture, and this shows to good advantage in the present work. Moreover, in writing the history of Prague, he had unavoidably to confront the histories of three fatally intertwined but distinct groups: the Czechs themselves, the Germans (or German-speaking Czechs), and the Jews. To his credit, he handles

1 *Prague in Black and Gold: Scenes from the Life of a European City*, by Peter Demetz; Hill and Wang, 411 pages, $27.50; $15 paper.

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this difficult feat with great aplomb and never allows himself to indulge in partisan sentiments.

The history of Prague is tortuous. Few European cities can have endured more vicissitudes in such relentless and dizzying succession. For the non-Czech reader, there are special difficulties as well, mostly connected with the formidable Czech language, brambled with dense consonants as it is. (Demetz takes a mischievous pleasure in citing the well-known tongue twister "strč prst skrz krk": "put your finger down your throat." Saying this is like having a mouth full of thistles.) Then, too, merely to follow the fortunes of Bohemian dynasties and their rulers can be strange and confusing; for example, among the many Václavs (or Wenceslaws), Václav IV was sent by his suspicious father, King John (Jan), to be raised in France where he came to be known as Charles, and later reigned under that name as Charles IV, one of the greatest Czech rulers. (In Czech, of course, he is known as Karel!)

At surmounting these obvious obstacles, Demetz is superb. A firm if somewhat garrulous cicerone, he guides the reader through the many twisting thickets of Bohemian history; en route, he often manages to convey a feeling for the powerful personalities of distant figures such as the formidable thirteenth-century Přemyslid ruler Otakar II, "the only Shakespearean character of Czech history," and yet one oddly neglected by Czech historiographers. He is good, too, at redressing neglects. For example, his chapter 6, "Mozart in Prague," contains a detailed account of the Italian influence on Prague, an influence usually ignored. Demetz's range of reference is enormous: there is a meticulous, sixteen-page annotated bibliography of works in English, Czech, German, French, Italian, and Latin. Unfortunately, there are no notes (doubtless a publisher's "economy"), and so it is sometimes hard to track down references.

Despite the author's erudition, *Prague in Black and Gold* is a curiously uneven book. Eight dense historical chapters, which constitute the bulk of the book, are sandwiched between a quite personal preface and an even more personal, and outspoken, postscript titled "A Difficult Return to Prague." In the postscript, Demetz describes his return to his native city after forty years of exile, and the account is by turns mordant, wry, and moving. It is incontestably the best-written section in the entire book. Published separately, the postscript has, quite justly, earned a certain celebrity and has drawn attention to the book. The preface, however, with its startling opening admission—"I love and hate my hometown, and my warring sentiments have not been assuaged by recurrent returns to Prague since the takeover of 1989"—promises more than the ensuing book does, or perhaps can, deliver. Alas, the eight intervening chapters, even allowing for occasional successes (such as chapter 4 on Jan Hus and the very complicated Hussite Revolution of 1415–22), are leaden-footed and frequently shambling. Though there are occasional errors of fact, the true problem with the book lies in its English prose.

Only when Demetz draws on his beloved German (or Austrian) literature or when he deals with happenings with which he has been personally involved does his prose lift and become lucent and graceful. Thus, when he describes the funeral of Masaryk on September 21, 1937 (at which he was present as a fifteen-year-old), Demetz gives a splendid and quite moving account which holds the reader's attention as nothing else does in the hundreds of preceding pages. (Incidentally, the book concludes with this funeral; no explanation is given as to why the Nazi era as well as the forty years of Communist rule are left virtually unmentioned. Perhaps these will form the subject of a later volume.)

Part of Demetz's difficulty in *Prague in Black and Gold*, apart from the prose (about which more later), arises from his governing thesis. For Demetz, Prague is not so much "magic Prague," the city of Cabalists, Lurianic mystics, and the ubiquitous Gol-

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em, but instead a city of rationalists. For him, it is the city of Kepler and Tycho Brahe, of David Gans and the physician Johannes Jessenius, of Bernard Bolzano and Masaryk (a philosopher as well as president). Demetz is irritated, and no doubt rightly so, by the clinging Bohemian fog and shadows which insinuate themselves into our usual images of Prague, and he sees this distorting fog as a by-product of a degraded Romanticism, resurrected somewhat paradoxically under the Communist regime. He is especially critical of the 1973 work by the Italian Slavist Angelo Maria Ripellino, recently available in English under the title, appropriately enough, of *Magic Prague*.

Now *Magic Prague* is a wonderful book, and fully deserving of the "classic" status it enjoys, for the author was passionately in love both with Prague and with Prague's poets (he had an incomparable knowledge of Czech poetry). *Magic Prague* is a kind of rapturous paean to a city which exists, which can only exist, in golden words rather than in golden stones. It is a book of excess, to be sure, and as such, hard to refute with dry anecdotes of rationalists, however illustrious. Demetz does his best, but he has, I think, cut the ground away too severely from under his own feet. By abjuring any interest in the "mystical" aspect of Prague, he banishes all affective, all passionate, notes from his account, and this deadens his book.

Whether we like it or not, and even if it is an aberration, Czechs themselves—and not only sensationalistic German or American novelists, such as Gustav Meyrink or Francis Marion Crawford—nurture, and continue to feast upon, such legends as that of the Golem. I recently opened a 1996 collection of poems (*Světlohry*) by the fine contemporary Czech poet Jana Stroblová and my eyes fell on the verse "V pozadí vesmír, tak ponurý jak spící Golem" ("In the background the universe, somber as a sleeping Golem"). And again, in 1997, a large and profusely illustrated scholarly tome titled *Magnum Opus* appeared in Prague, with the subtitle *The Book of Sacred Geometry, Alchemy, Magic, Astrology, the Kabbala, and Secret Societies in Bohemia*. The book, it turns out, was the catalog for a very popular exhibition. This tendency may not be laudable (and one understands and sympathizes with Demetz's sense of frustration in the face of the obdurately irrational), but it is a living tendency and apparently a part of the Czech *mentalité* which cannot be ignored. I do not suggest that Demetz ought to have oiled his narrative with the chrism of legend, but by eschewing it so resolutely, he has left himself little but dry, and all too often desiccated, fragments. The critic Erich Auerbach remarked in *Mimesis* that "to write history is so difficult that most historians are forced to make concessions to the technique of legend." I do not think that Auerbach was being wholly censorious in formulating this dictum. Even an ironic recognition of the role of legend in the city's history would have lightened and animated Demetz's narrative.

Still, there is much of great interest and value in *Prague in Black and Gold*. Demetz has a nice proclivity for rescuing unjustly neglected figures and works from oblivion, and he does this regularly throughout the book. Thus, in discussing the founding of Prague and its mythic mother, the "soothsayer" Libussa (or Libuše in Czech), he draws not only on the fascinating Latin chronicle of Cosmas, a twelfth-century Bohemian chronicler, but on some unexpected literary sources such as the unread (and, indeed, unreadable) colossal drama by the German poet Clemens Brentano entitled *Die Gründung Prags* as well as the verse play *Libussa* by the dour Austrian playwright of genius Franz Grillparzer. In Demetz's account, delightfully, Libuše herself comes through as a striking figure, at once resolute, shrewd and seductive.

Women have played a decisive role in the history of Prague, and it is another of Demetz's merits to have brought this out, though thankfully without the usual professorial handwringing and *meae culpae*. In addition to the expected historical figures, such as Maria Theresa, there is a trenchant

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account of the nineteenth-century novelist Božena Němcová, the founder of all modern Czech literature, and her desperate struggle for personal liberty in the midst of a tormented marriage. Utterly obscure women, such as Marie Holzer, outspoken in her views on women's rights (and finally murdered by her husband), step briefly from the shadows in Demetz's telling. Milena Jesenská, whom Demetz rather primly calls "Kafka's onetime friend," makes several appearances, as does George Eliot, accompanied by George Henry Lewes (her common-law husband, not merely her "devoted friend," as Demetz terms him).

Demetz resurrects some neglected personages but he himself manages to neglect perhaps the most significant of all Czech historical figures: Jan Amos Komenský, more commonly known as Comenius (1592–1670). True, Comenius was Moravian and not born in Prague, but his influence has been immense, and not only in his own time: his significance for Masaryk—himself of Moravian and Slovak origins—as a thinker and as a statesman was huge (and well documented). It is puzzling to see only three cursory mentions of him here.

Demetz refreshingly abstains from passing judgment on figures whom, we sense, he must otherwise deplore. One such is the modern poet Vitězslav Nezval, arguably the most gifted Czech poet of the twentieth century and yet, for much of his later career, a shameless apologist for Stalinism and an effusive panegyrist of Stalin himself. Together with Seifert, Nezval remains the inimitable poet of Prague, and Demetz cites him, often to striking effect:

> Prague of a hundred towers
> with the fingers of all the saints
> with the fingers of perjury . . .
> with the burning fingers of women
> lying on their backs
> with the fingers that touch the stars . . .
> with the fingers of a windmill and a lilac bush.

And of modern Czech poetry, a body of work created not only by Nezval but also by such supremely talented writers as František Halas, František Hrubín, Vladimír Holan, and, more recently, Jan Skácel, Demetz can write, with long-overdue justice, "Czech poeticist poetry still constitutes one of the most astonishing and wonderful secrets of Prague."

It is a pity that Demetz did not devote more of his book to Czech poetry or to Czech literature in general. He has a feeling for literature which is perceptible at once to the reader, a feeling which he does not possess for political or military or even cultural history. All too often, his capsule accounts of historical personages lack vividness and specificity. This is particularly evident in what should otherwise have been the most interesting chapter of the book, that on Rudolf II and his court.

It may be that Demetz's dislike of the irrational and of the fantastic legends surrounding Rudolf colors his view. This is a period, after all, in which not only Rudolf himself but such compelling individuals as Kepler and Brahe; the alchemist John Dee; and Rabbi Judah Loew, the most illustrious scholar in the history of Jewish Prague, flourished. Demetz wades manfully, if disdainfully, into the dark crosscurrents of the Cabala in sixteenth-century Prague but his heart is not in it; his account is indebted heavily to the researches of Moshe Idel (whom he misnames Moshe Edel in the text but gets right in the bibliography) and contains nothing new or surprising. The whole treatment of Rudolf, whose personality and career leave Demetz manifestly baffled, is weak; readers would do better to turn to the classic account by R. J. W. Evans, *Rudolf II and his World: A Study in Intellectual History* (Oxford, 1973) or the more recent monograph, published in Prague and distributed by Thames and Hudson, entitled *Rudolf II and Prague: The Imperial Court and Residential City as the Cultural and Spiritual Heart of Central Europe* (1997).

By far the weakest aspect of *Prague in Black and Gold*, however, is the prose in which it is written. True, the postscript is elegant;

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but, as Demetz himself informs us, this was composed originally in German and translated into English by "Professor Harry Zohn of Brandeis University." Would that Professor Zohn had been called in for the remainder of the book! The opening two chapters are merely ponderous and flat, but with chapter 3 (is this where the copyeditor dozed off?), the English language begins a cruel and punishing journey, more in black than in gold, through the byways of Czech history. This is not merely a question of poor English prose style, but of outright solecism, including ungrammatical constructions, run-on sentences, dangling participles, misplaced complements, false accords, and incorrect usage of individual words. For a few dozen pages the reader is inclined to pardon Professor Demetz (after Demetz's forty years at deconstructionist Yale could his prose not suffer?). Soon, however, the continual accumulation of stylistic and grammatical infelicities begins to gall.

Throughout the book Demetz demonstrates an almost perverse mastery of the dangling participle; for example, on page 187, he can write of the Englishwoman Jane Elizabeth Weston in Rudolfine Prague that she "was buried in the cloister of St. Thomas . . . where thousands of foreign visitors, among them many English, now quaff the famous dark beer oblivious to historical reminiscences." I, too, prefer my beer dark and oblivious but this is not, I suspect, what Demetz meant to say. A little later, he indulges in a spectacular run-on sentence (I am tempted to call it a runaway sentence), which I quote in full:

> But for a cup of real coffee, Prague connoisseurs had to turn to Georgios Deodatus, from Damascus, who, clad in an Arab burnoose, walked through the streets offering hot coffee, and it is to his never-ending fame that he bought himself a house on Karlova Street in the Old Town and established the first coffeehouse there in 1713—exactly at the moment when Prague was visited (for the last time) by the plague, which killed thirteen thousand people.

Oh well, at least they had "a cup of real coffee" before succumbing! This sentence (and far too many others) also illustrates what I would call Demetz's "rock-slide" style of writing. One fact dislodges another in his mind which he cannot resist inserting, and the two roll downhill together; as they roll, they dislodge further facts which scatter before them, peppering the reader with non sequiturs.

Sometimes Demetz's careless English leads to comical *malentendus*. Thus, of Kafka's birthplace, he can write "Franz Kafka was born there—true, in a purely topographical sense." Is this opposed to, say, the *obstetric* sense? Again, to speak of the "fundaments" of a building, an obsolete usage though correct in the purely lexical sense, betrays an insensitivity to the connotations of English.

If the ineptitude of Demetz's English is surprising, the casual incompetence of his editor is astonishing. In the preface, Demetz acknowledges the well-known editor Elisabeth Sifton, "who spent more time on my text than it ever deserved." I cannot say what amount of time Demetz's text deserved, but clearly it required more than it got. This is all the sadder in that Demetz is a genuinely distinguished writer in German. His little book *René Rilkes Prager Jahre* (1953) is an elegant and witty evocation of the Prague of Rilke's childhood and is beautifully written. His collection of essays *Böhmische Sonne/Mährischer Mond: Essays und Erinnerungen* (1996), in which the postscript of the present work first appeared, is equally graceful. What a pity that Professor Demetz did not write the present work in German first and then oversee its translation into English.

Despite the flaws of this book, Peter Demetz has given us a very useful work, and one which both students of Czech history and travelers to Prague will find an invaluable source book. *Prague in Black and Gold* is a book for the obstinate reader, but such a reader will be more than amply rewarded by the wealth and breadth of learning it contains.

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Synthetic grit

Martin Amis Night Train.
Harmony Books, 175 pages, $20

reviewed by James Wolcott

Martin Amis isn't the first literary novelist to roll up his sleeves and crack his knuckles to compose a thriller. Graham Greene and Somerset Maugham indulged in cloak-and-dagger affairs. James Jones, the author of such heavy-going group studies of manpower in action as *From Here to Eternity*, *The Thin Red Line*, and *Some Came Running*, tore loose late in his career with a private-detective yarn called *A Touch of Danger*, an unintentionally hilarious outing in which Jones's hero—called Lobo, no less—beds a fine lady named Chantal and informs us afterward that "her lovemaking had the same style and class as the rest of her." Aiming higher and also missing by a mile was Norman Mailer, whose *Tough Guys Don't Dance* offered nastier portions of sex and violence, steeped in Mailer's pretentious notions of evil. Susannah Moore, normally a novelist of designer-perfume sensibility, went feral with *In the Cut*. Amis's own father, the late Kingsley Amis, tried a couple of whodunits, *The Riverside Villas Murders* (the murder plot being the novel's weakest link) and a fizzled experiment late in his career called *The Crime of the Century*.

It's tempting to chalk up such slumming expeditions as acts of expediency—attempts to score a commercial success after some literary setbacks. (By the time Jones did *A Touch of Danger*, he was desperate to regain footing following the mortifying failure of *The Merry Month of May*.) After *The Information*—an ambitious novel whose critical reception was pockmarked by revelations about his personal affairs (divorce and remarriage, a grown daughter he never knew he had, costly dental work), and which failed to sell well despite all the hubbub—Martin Amis may have wanted to turn to something simpler and more marketable. Taking on a thriller also can be an effort to recapture some primitive magic in writing—to rid the mind of literary over-refinement and complexity, and to recapture the adrenaline rush of rutting-animal fiction by rough-stuff artists such as James M. Cain and Jim Thompson, whose slim novels were written fast and still read fast. It can be a way for a writer to pare the fat from his prose, down to the savage bone.

Certainly Martin Amis's thriller, a police procedural called *Night Train*, can't be dismissed as a literary gent's joy ride. It's too little fun for that. Soberly, conscientiously, Amis has set numerous difficulties for himself in telling this story, performing in various forms of drag. Set in a generic "second-echelon" American city (i.e., urban hellhole), *Night Train* is narrated by a generic police detective and recovering alcoholic named Mike Hoolihan, who, despite the name (and here's the twist), is a woman. She is, in fact, a whole lot of woman. Applying makeup, she muses, "I used to be something, I guess, but now I'm just another big blonde old broad." The case that haunts blondie is the apparent suicide of a peerless beauty named Jennifer Rockwell, found naked in a chair with a .22 at her side. The daughter of a career cop, Jennifer had everything to live for, as the cliché goes, blessed with not only a stunning body but also a humming brain. A whiz at math and physics, she was a member of the astronomy department at a local university, where she was enjoying a highly sexed relationship with a colleague, Trader Faulkner. (An in-joke: Trader Faulkner is the name of a British actor who costarred in *A High Wind in Jamaica*, a movie Amis himself appeared in as a child.) The case seems cut-and-dried, as all such fictional cases do, until the autopsy reveals three bullets lodged in the deceased's head, making suicide unlikely (how do you shoot yourself three times?); later, traces of Lithium are found in her system. (More mischief: the coroner's name is Dr. No.) Mike squares her shoulders and sets out in search of Jennifer's killer, her only suspect being Trader Faulkner. As John Updike

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noted in his London *Times* review of *Night Train*, the absence of other suspects—the paucity of subsidiary characters—gives the novel a cramped feel compared to standard thrillers. But of course Amis isn't writing a standard thriller. He's trying to subvert and contort its conventions from the inside, through sheer virtuoso Style. The actual clue-gathering and puzzle-solving are less vital to Amis than putting over a complicated charade. He's a literary figure attempting a genre experiment, a Brit trying to sound American, a man trying to impersonate a woman who bears a man's name:

> Long ago I learned that I cannot get the good guys.
>
> I am one of the good guys, and I go out there and get the bad guys. I can get the bad guys.
>
> But I cannot get the good guys.
>
> I just cannot get the good guys.

Despite such Joan Didion-ish passages, the man-woman business proves less vexing for Amis than his American impersonation. He puts on a good bluff, but little things go wrong, like names. (Mike has an ex-boyfriend named Deniss. An American might spell his name "Denis" or "Dennis," but "Deniss" makes the reader blink.) He also doesn't have a firm grip on the lingo, hitting an off-note in his opening paragraph, in which Mike announces, "I am a police," insisting, "it's a parlance we have." When John Updike queried this usage in the London *Times*, citing it as "the first of a number of American locutions new to this native speaker," Amis angrily retorted in an interview, "Bullshit!"—claiming that they use that parlance in Baltimore, for example. I happen to have grown up near Baltimore, and I don't recall ever hearing a cop or state trooper refer to himself as "a police" (and it isn't a usage bandied about on TV's "Homicide," shot on location in Baltimore). The obscenities and ethnic putdowns sprinkled across *Night Train*—references to Japs, slopes, jigs, and faggots—also have a synthetic grit, like plastic Mamet.

If Amis's story carried more interest and momentum, these minor off-notes would call less attention to themselves. The problem is that everything about *Night Train* calls notice to itself because it exists solely as an act of exhibitionism—of showmanship. Gifted pros in the crime field, from Ruth Rendell to Donald Westlake, are confident enough in their powers of verisimilitude and methodology (how locks are broken, how certain medications can be lethally mixed) not to feel the need to nudge the reader and emphasize their works' authenticity. It would destroy the lifelike illusion of unfolding developments that they usher onto the page. Amis, however, twitches beneath his multiple masks. Self-conscious about the form he's infiltrating, he insists time and again that he's giving us the sordid goods fresh from the abyss, not counterfeit TV and movie dramatization. He makes numerous scoffing references to cop shows, culminating in a passage where his female mouthpiece dismisses the layman's fetish for motive in homicide. A veteran police like her knows there's no "why" to murder. "I'll tell you who wants a why. *Jurors* want a why. They want reruns of *Perry Mason* and *The Defenders*. They want *Car Fifty-Four, Where Are You?*" If only those sissy couch potatoes could be as existential as us make-believe cops!

The old "Perry Mason" series, admired by such disparate types as Ayn Rand and the hip art critic Dave Hickey (who has a superb tribute to "Perry Mason" in his recent collection *Air Guitar*), was at least an honest entertainment with lustrous dark shadings of Fifties and early Sixties Los Angeles. Its stories were logical devices which left no loose ends. No mere craftsman, Amis finds the search for neat answers intellectually shallow; he makes *Night Train* deliberately, defiantly inconclusive. After much wheel-spinning within the small circle of Jennifer's acquaintances and surviving relations, the mystery of her murder defies solution and explanation. Instead, we are meant to attribute it to a cosmological crisis and a spiritual malaise induced by the philo-

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sophical fallout of her study of astronomy. (Talk of black holes in the universe leads Mike to characterize this case as "all hole." Critics of Amis's misogyny might suggest that this is how he typically portrays women—as all hole.) Jennifer's gesture of despair somehow infects Mike like an information virus from beyond the grave.

> I've seen bodies, dead bodies, in tiled morgues, in cellblocks, in district lockups, in trunks of cars, in project stairwells, in loading-dock doorways, in tractor-trailer turnarounds, in torched rowhouses, in corner carryouts, in cross alleys, in crawlspaces, and I've never seen one that sat with me like the body of Jennifer Rockwell, propped there naked after the act of love and life, saying even this, all this, I leave behind.

So it's adios, earth. "Suicide is the night train, speeding your way to darkness," Mike tells us, and in the novel's final pages she falls off the wagon and boards her own night train to oblivion (Night Train also being the name of a brand of cheap booze). Which pretty much rules out a sequel.

A Touch of Danger didn't prove a breakthrough or breakout for James Jones (though some of his later work was creditable), *Tough Guys Don't Dance* didn't inject any jazz into Norman Mailer's *Harlot's Ghost* and *Oswald's Tale*, and I suspect *Night Train* will lead nowhere for Martin Amis. It seems to leave him in the same bind—or hole—he was in before. A writer who made his reputation with whiplash wisecracks and a bravura show of pouty, insolent youth in novels such as *The Rachel Papers* and *Money* (perhaps his best book, despite going astray with a lot of Nabokovian bumbling involving a doppelgänger), Amis has made strenuous efforts to mature. He has confronted unthinkable horrors like the Holocaust (*Time's Arrow*) and nuclear destruction (*London Fields*), immersing himself in humanistic clouds of gloom, like his friend and mentor Saul Bellow, to whom and to whose wife *Night Train* is dedicated. (Amis's devotion to Bellow is a little oedipal drama all its own, since Kingsley haughtily dismissed Bellow as a muddler, referring to *Herzog* as "a pretty pissy book." Bellow has become a substitute highbrow father figure.) The problem with Amis as a novelist lies deeper than the maturation process or his subjects.

For better and worse, he is primarily a monologuist, a riff artist; his novels always read as if they were written in the first person. He's incapable of writing scenes in which characters are at cross-purposes, competing for their own interests. His media-saturated sensibility is sharp, cunning, and often deadly accurate, but it always functions as commentary, not fully rounded presentation. The comic stagecraft of English fiction, a tradition that runs from Jane Austen, Dickens, and Trollope to P. G. Wodehouse, Anthony Powell, and Kingsley Amis, is missing in Martin's *oeuvre*, where the one-liners are the work of a lone assassin.

There are shrewd observations in *Night Train*, as when Mike visits the local university and notes, "Sexual allure is a physical problem that the students are no longer addressing. In my day, at the Academy, the women were all tits and ass and the men were all dick and bicep. Now the student body has no body. Now it's strictly sloppy-joe." But they're general observations with a comic flip. Despite one of his early novels being titled *Other People*, Amis has never seemed that interested in other people, and as his fame and sense of literary privilege have grown, he has become even less so. Compare *Night Train*'s cookie-cutter characters with Nelson Algren's lowlifes or Ed McBain's precinct cops, and Amis isn't even in the same ballpark. He maintains a glass shield between himself and the passing scene; he practices keen surveillance, overcompensating for his detachment with lyrical rollcalls (like the passage about dead bodies quoted above) intended to simulate sympathy. ("Message: I care," as George Bush once said.) In time, I suspect, Amis will slowly drop the pretense to fiction and devote himself to lofty journalism. The narrow focus of his personal vision points toward punditry.

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Apollonius now

Apollonios Rhodios The Argonautika. Translated and with an introduction, commentary and glossary by Peter Green. University of California Press, 490 pages, $60

reviewed by Louis V. Galdieri

The story of Jason and the Argonauts has captured the imaginations of translators, adapters, movie producers, and pedants, but until now Greekless readers who wanted a faithful English version of the *Argonautica* of Apollonius Rhodius had to rely on R. C. Seaton's Loeb trot and the prose paperbacks of E. V. Rieu and Richard Hunter. Peter Green has changed all of that: his lively, careful, and sometimes very beautiful English verse rendering will be the standard English version of Apollonius for many years to come. The fleece is won.

Green's nuanced and careful understanding of the Greek poem, its author, and audience informs his translation from start to finish. He discerns a complex and serious literary motive in Apollonius's fabulous epic. Apollonius, Green tells us in his introduction, was a poet out of key with his time, who set out in the *Argonautica* to claim the marvelous as poetry's proper domain. His epic rehabilitates an "archaic worldview" consciously rejected by the intellectual pioneers of the Periclean age, and makes no concession to the tendency, evident in other literary and intellectual quarters of the third century B.C., to read the ancient legends allegorically and to redefine myth as irrational or improbable.

Instead, Apollonius re-creates a heroic world in which strange and wonderful things really did happen, once upon a time: his poetry spins tales of acorn-eating Arcadians who lived before the moon, magical rocks, potions, monsters, and heroes. But he creates this world of make-believe with a sophisticated sense of anachronism, an awareness of how remote is the marvelous world he evokes. His sense of belatedness is apparent at every turn: at every landing of the Argo, there are traces of a "marvel," visible even in his day; or there is an ancient mystery rite, a potent cure, a wondrous power, inaccessible or forbidden to his age; or a water-bearing race held "to this day" in Aegina that recalls another race, time out of mind, when Jason and his Argonauts strove to see who could soonest fetch water and bring it back to the ship. His heroes and battles and speeches and landings seem drawn not from life or from popular memory, but from study, and in particular from the grammatical and rhetorical study of Homer.

The *Argonautica* is, however, less an imitation of Homer than an exploration of the poetic and ethical possibilities that Homeric epic entails. So Apollonius's most Homeric similes draw the reader's attention to their Homeric qualities without necessarily deepening or enriching the narrative; and often his poetic strengths lie in decidedly un-Homeric directions, in, for example, the crafting of his famous simile of the aborigines in book 2—an epic simile likening dead aborigines to felled trees. Moral questions that drive characters in the *Iliad*—the role of good luck and cleverness in keeping mere mortals from grim fate, the irrevocability of human destiny—are for Apollonius commonplaces. The real moral interest in the *Argonautica* lies elsewhere, in careful portraits of characters in particular attitudes, as if Apollonius has chiseled their features into stone or created a frieze or relief. In book 3, for example, Apollonius summons vocabulary and imagery from the *Iliad* when likening barefoot Medea to an abducted woman; but Medea has, ironically, abducted herself and at least partly created the dire necessity to which she insists she is subject. This is not testimony to the force of necessity over human life, but poetry that approaches delicate psychological observation.

Or, again, Apollonius opens his poem with a catalogue of ships that consciously follows the order of Homer's catalogue in the *Iliad*, and takes us on a tour, in book 4,

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of the geography of Odysseus's homecoming, but there's very little room in the Argonauts' heroic enterprise for the likes of Agamemnon and Achilles. Having dispatched with Heracles in book 2, Apollonius leaves the Argonauts to wonder how much better off they'd be if Heracles were there. And there's some truth to what they say: without Heracles, the characters in the *Argonautica* are susceptible to Aeëtes' spear and other harms; but they are also open to new ethical possibilities from which Heracles would have guarded them. Their venture may turn out "far from what they'd hoped," but Jason brings them together in a "common venture," where "many heads, better judgments" is the rule. The poem produces not a Heraclean hero—who, as a remarkable passage in book 4 reminds us, leaves suffering and woe in his glorious path—but a hero and a heroine, Jason and Medea, who are bound to one another in a shared undertaking.

The *Argonautica* is, in sum, a poem filled with what Green calls "informed pleasures," pleasures reserved for readers who can luxuriate in the poet's allusions to Homer, or recognize some of the many places where Virgil owes a debt to Apollonius. (If memory fails, Green's commentary is of enormous help.) And yet there are other, simpler pleasures in reading Apollonius, like those that centuries of readers have taken in reading the love story of Jason and Medea in book 3. Green's third book is probably his strongest, but book 3 is by no means the only place where he's strong. When in book 2 Green describes the "wolf-light" at Thynias, he captures, in English verse, some of the marvel and awe induced in the exhausted heroes by the appearance of dawntime Apollo, and produces one of the translation's finer passages:

> At that moment when darkness is ebbing, yet light's divine
> brightness has not yet come, when an impalpable glimmer
> suffuses the night, what waking men call wolf-light,
> they entered the harbor of Thynias, barren island,
> and stumbled ashore, exhausted by their grievous
> labors; and here there appeared before them Apollo, Leto's
> son, on his way back from Lykia to the swarming
> Hyperboreans; and golden, framing either cheek,
> the clustering curls outfloated as he strode.

Green is especially good at setting a gloomy or grim tone—as in his description of Brimo, "roarer and rearer,/ Brimo, night wanderer, chthonian sovereign"—but he ranges across many moods in rendering this very moody poem. So, for instance, his often exquisite, sometimes archaic diction ("gravid," "without cess," "unhandselled") will deliberately take the poem in an unexpected or comic direction. One lively passage, for example, describes Medea's "hot wired" nerve endings. In another, Aeëtes describes his two brazen-footed bulls, "mouths gusting gouts of flame," but when Jason tells his companions about the beasts, he doesn't quite get it right: "two brazen footed bulls, mouths gouting gusts of flame." Medea's "virgin heart" beats "a tattoo on her ribs"; after a sojourn through the desert, a hero emerges from drinking, "his lips all wet slobbered"; and when Polydeukes scores a knockout punch, his opponent's teeth are "slamdashed" to the ground, as they would be in a Superman comic book.

To its credit, Green's translation only occasionally betrays its academic origins. Green describes himself as "hopelessly old-fashioned," and even in his very learned commentary he is not prone to theoretical posturing or any such nonsense; he aims to produce a version of Apollonius that readers can enjoy, appreciate, and understand. Without being heavy-handed, his translation alerts us to the traditional shape of the *Argonautica* (reproducing, in one place, two curiously pedantic lines glossing the term *mossynes*, and, in another, a doublet that is

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pretty clearly an accident of textual tradition). Yet he sometimes seems scrupulous to a fault: the purist in him wants to purge his text of Latinized proper names that are, in many cases, familiar to English-language readers (he uses Medeia for Medea, etc.); he can do so only inconsistently, and he probably would have been better off conceding this point to established usage.

In a few places, Green chooses fidelity to his Greek original at the expense of the English poem he is writing. At the first sight of Medea in book 3, for example, Green follows Apollonius closely, so Medea slips into the poem as she does in the original—without much fanfare, "on her way to visit her sister in her chamber." But compare Green's translation of this passage with that of Apollonius's eighteenth-century translator, Francis Fawkes. Fawkes's very loose rendering of Medea's entry scene makes good reading precisely because it departs from the original, building suspense and anticipation for a full eight lines before bringing in Medea.

> The proud apartments that remain'd
> contain
> Chalciope, Medea and their train.
> Ordain'd a priestess to the Stygian queen,
> She at the palace now was seldom seen:
> But artful Juno, on this signal day,
> Within the regal court decreed her stay.
> Here now, from room to room, the pensive
> maid,
> To find Chalciope her sister, stray'd.

An unflinching fidelity is not Fawkes's concern: he rearranges the order of Apollonius's verse to satisfy the conventions and expectations that his English audience brings to the poem. This doesn't necessarily make Fawkes a better translator than Green. Indeed, his couplets very often produce an unintended bathos. Even so, Fawkes can take liberties where he chooses, because he, not Apollonius, is the master of his English poem. Fawkes's attitude toward translation, antiquity, and the inheritance that we call literary tradition may be most unscholarly, but it's not too dissimilar from the attitude toward Homer evident in Apollonius's own poem, or even in that most un-Homeric of Homeric poems, the *Iliad* of Alexander Pope.

Little Kazin & big God

Alfred Kazin
God and the American Writer.
Knopf, 288 pages, $25

reviewed by Marc M. Arkin

About every twenty years, more or less, American intellectuals rediscover religion. And, about every thirty years, more or less, American intellectuals rediscover the Civil War. We are at present, I fear, in one of those periods of harmonic convergence, when American intellectuals have rediscovered both God and the Civil War at the same time. Famed critic Alfred Kazin's latest book, *God and the American Writer*, is a prime example of what takes place when this epiphany happens to someone to whom these topics are not merely terra nova, but terra incognita.

God and the American Writer is an old-fashioned book of literary criticism. It consists of twelve "trenchant critical studies"—to quote the publicity material—and a prelude and afterword. The subjects range, in chronological order, from Hawthorne to Faulkner, with stops in between for Emerson, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Melville, Whitman, Lincoln, Dickinson, William James, Mark Twain, T. S. Eliot, Robert Frost, and assorted incidental hangers-on. There is plenty of biographical detail, plenty of well-chosen quotation. There are no gendered readings, no multicultural perspectives, no playful deconstructions of text, no body parts strewn about the literary landscape. There are also no surprises. But for the occasional neologism and reference to events in the recent past—and the occasional autobiographical anecdote dispensed in the magisterial tone of a Grand Old Man—this collection could have been

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written in 1942, when Kazin published *On Native Grounds*, his first book of criticism.

Hawthorne, we are told, is a storyteller who is "afflicted" by the "judicial crimes of the first Hawthornes in Salem," "mesmerized by what he feared and hated in their sense of justice," haunted by the "gloom and chill prevailing in Puritan times." Emerson was "a prophet not of God in every American heart but of rugged individualism," a believer in the great man who "of course . . . never saw around him a man greater than himself." Walt Whitman "knew that American individualism, American strut and brag, American egocentricity, American triumphalism in all departments, had just found in him their most extreme and shameless expression."

Kazin does, of course, have some strong personal tastes, a few of them idiosyncratic. He is, for example, deeply irritated by Mark Twain. Kazin loathes *Tom Sawyer*; he only grudgingly accepts the conventional view that *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is a great book. Twain's satire rubs Kazin the wrong way, and Twain the man annoys him. On the other hand, Kazin is reverential toward T. S. Eliot, whose "virtuosity" and "ravishing lines" (despite the need for Pound's "cutting and redressing") yield "intense pleasure." This appreciation, Kazin admits, comes despite Eliot's appalling anti-Semitism because "if I had to exclude anti-Semites [from admiration], I would have little enough to read." In a chapter that virtually sings with excerpts from her poetry, Kazin proclaims Emily Dickinson "the most penetrating literary intelligence honored in this book." Dickinson provides the virtual mantra of the collection, as Kazin repeatedly quotes her remark: "It is true that the unknown is the largest need of intellect, although for this no one thinks to thank God."

Ah yes, God. What about God, who forms half the titular subject of the book? God plays a surprisingly limited role in these essays; mostly He gets cameo appearances and the occasional walk-on. It is not until the afterword that Kazin meets his subject head-on, only to rediscover American individualism. Thus, Kazin avers that the "American writer was so self-sufficient that if his art was entirely his own, so (if he had one) was his religion." More to the point, if the "American writer is usually alone in his imagination and in his devotions a secret to the rest of us," the reason is that "religion is so publicly vehement, publicized, and censorious." The American writer is the apostle of an individualism that is "bracing in opposition and innovation, never as belief in itself. . . . Self-determination can also be the private reasoning from the heart which goes into belief"—whatever that means.

As this indicates, Kazin has some trouble sorting out the difference between organized religion and God, although he seems quite sure that the latter, if He exists at all, does not spend much time inhabiting the former. In Europe, at least, organized religion is "a social experience . . . is heritage, is institution, is teaching, company, and safety. It is where we are most at home and is always there when we want to go home again." Never mind that Kazin has been rather unkind to T. S. Eliot's Anglo-Catholic institutional yearnings because he "never recognized that in not coming close to the Father and the Son he was as much a 'heretic' in the American style as the self-dependent writers of the 'inner light' he condemned." In America, this religious traditionalism is limited to the South, where, Kazin explains, it serves the interests of reaction and racism. Thus, Faulkner comes in for praise because "such is now the shallowness and aggressiveness of public religion in the service of hard-right politics that one wants to thank God that Faulkner was not personally a believer."

But, back to the religious individualism of the American writer. What insights does it supply us? Melville "took on 'God' as a power so like himself that He became a rival"; Emerson's "personal gift of faith was limited to himself." Although thoughts of the divine "never left Emily Dickinson's mind . . . the fact that He was never there

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when you needed him led her in so many directions peculiarly her own that what she came to *think* in a poem or letter astonished her before it did everyone else." Mark Twain spent his life trying to dispose of the Presbyterian God that poisoned his success with guilt. William James "believed so much in religion as therapy" that belief in God was unnecessary for him. Frost is "so triumphant in his own eyes that in his mental journey he generously included God as an *idea* intellectually (not devotionally) to be wrestled with." At least Harold Bloom, whatever his failings, has the scholarly imagination to come right out and call this individualistic American religion a new form of gnosticism and to treat writers as its exemplars.

What does Kazin make of the striking and lovely metaphors about God that he tosses out earlier in the book, Dickinson's wonderful "our Old Neighbor—God" or Whitman's "God comes a loving bedfellow and sleeps at my side all night"? What of the deep travails of depression and faith that impel Melville to the Holy Land, a trip described in a travel diary that, in Kazin's well-chosen excerpts, is haunted by the aridness of the place: "Desert more fearful to look at than the ocean." Or the profound sense of providence, expressed in the cadences of the King James Bible, that permeates Lincoln's utterances, especially during the war years. Kazin inexplicably downplays the resonance of the King James Bible in Lincoln's language and dismisses Lincoln's providential deity as a God "born of war. It would not have survived without him, since only Lincoln understood him."

Kazin finds it difficult to give these things the weight they deserve because, as he explains, "I think of religion as the most intimate expression of the human heart, as the most secret of personal confessions where we admit to ourselves alone our fears and losses, our sense of holy dread and awe before the unflagging power of a universe." What this means to Kazin is that "really good American writers" don't talk about religion, don't say with Tolstoy that "God is the name of my desire," don't confide "in a personal God." For Kazin, religion springs from the human personality, not from an encounter with the objectively transcendent, be it a personal God or something else. Skeptics can certainly write about the religious impulses of others, but it does take an act of empathetic imagination that Kazin seems hard pressed to muster. Even when the words are there, the spirit is absent.

As an intellectual appreciation of religion, the pieces are also somehow unsatisfying. The book's approach—primarily self-contained essays internally focused on individual writings—inhibits the enunciation of wider themes and connections. For example, reading the essays together, I was struck by the prominence of nature in so many of these writers' experience and expression of the divine. Perhaps I am still under the spell of "From Edwards to Emerson," the classic essay by the late Perry Miller. In it, Miller brilliantly observed that Emerson represented a continuation of eighteenth-century New England's ecstatic communion with "the images and shadows of divine things" in the natural world, now unhampered by the sense of original sin that restrained the Puritans from fusing God and nature into one. Nevertheless, it was difficult not to notice the recurrent image of forests, especially snowy ones—not to mention rivers and seas—and to wonder what a more systematic treatment could have drawn from that peculiarly American theme.

It might seem odd that someone so deeply out of sympathy with the religious impulse should write a book that purports to be about the artist's relationship with God. In fact, Kazin tells us that he actually intended to write a book about slavery but he realized that, as he quotes a friend (an admiring friend, of course), "The War (and slavery) is really the reason for the awful fascination of the whole subject of God in America. You put this *unforgivingly*." So, Kazin was saddled with God when he really wanted slavery.

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Kazin expends a great deal of effort attempting to convince the reader that slavery was bad, a matter about which I believe society has already reached a certain amount of moral consensus (if I may borrow a line from the *Los Angeles Times* review of December 21, 1997). Kazin apparently discovered the evils of bondage rather late in the day; he recounts that when viewing an exhibition of the Gilman Collection of historic photographs at the Metropolitan Museum, he was "devastated" to see the picture of a slave who had been branded on the forehead by his owner, a sugar planter. The story reminded me a bit of the eighteenth century's fascination with *The Man of Feeling*; people in salons would read the novel, weep at the hero's travails, and then, impressed with their own sensitivity, would feel themselves to be persons of great benevolence.

Well, there's no zealot like a convert. Kazin condemns Nathaniel Hawthorne as "maladroit" for the indifference to slavery that permitted him to accept patronage appointments from the pro-Southern Democratic party. He is shocked to find that Jefferson disliked slavery because of the degradation it caused fellow slaveholders, not because of any great fellow-feeling for his slaves. He is aghast that many northerners were more troubled by the prospect of disunion than by the persistence of slavery.

Emerson's virtue was that, despite a slow start, he embraced the antislavery cause and the war, proclaiming "gunpowder smells good." Kazin incongruously interprets this remark as expressing "the relief of an intellectual liberated from his books and papers," although I'm not aware that the Sage of Concord made any great efforts, beyond the lecture circuit, to escape his study. Most students of the period view Emerson as too self-absorbed to be anything but lukewarm on the subject of slavery. Be that as it may, Kazin prefers the "realist" Emerson—a man who complained that the Civil War was "abominably in my way"—to "the lesser Transcendentalists" who saw the war in terms of sin and salvation, a focus rather closer to the theme of the book.

Even Lincoln, who appears as a literary figure on the strength of his second inaugural address, comes in for his share of blame for being weak on race and temporizing over emancipation. In his moralistic fervor, Kazin forgets that Lincoln—"the realist"—had the loyalty of border states to contend with and that he feared that he lacked the constitutional authority to emancipate the slaves since, among other things, they were legally classified as property that could not be confiscated by government without just compensation. Kazin's heroes are intransigents like William Lloyd Garrison—who alienated fellow radical abolitionists by his egotism and the "severity of his language"—and John Brown. Now John Brown is certainly an interesting taste, a man who believed that he was sent by his Maker to purge away the sins of this guilty land with blood and whose first step in that direction, three years before his famous raid on Harper's Ferry, was to split open with broadswords the skulls of five of his pro-slavery neighbors in Pottawatomie, Kansas.

This type of historical interpretation by hindsight is naïve at best. But, Kazin goes beyond merely condemning historical figures for not having attained the moral insights of the late twentieth century. He is so intent on the long shadow that slavery casts over the American landscape that he adopts an anti-Southern attitude replete with every cliché of the last hundred years. In his chapter on Faulkner—one of the book's most compelling in purely literary terms—we begin with Jefferson Davis wondering whether the Confederacy would have won the Civil War had it established Christianity as its official religion. We then go on to find out that "the race hatred never ends," lynchings continue to this day in Mississippi jails, that "no people in the officially democratic United States of America were so bossy, thrusting, cocksure as a Southerner who thanked God every day he was not a 'nigger.'" Nobody?

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In fact, I found that the more I knew about the subject under consideration, the less I agreed with Kazin's readings, something that other reviewers have noted also. (*God and the American Writer* was nominated for a National Book Critics Circle award and has been widely reviewed in the popular press.) Perhaps this simply reflects the perils of being a generalist in an age of specialization. Nevertheless, the chapters most tightly focused on the slavery issue, those on Lincoln and Harriet Beecher Stowe, were unpersuasive to this reader, partly because of their tone and partly because so much of the background material was a bit off the mark. For example, Kazin calls Stowe's father, the irrepressible Reverend Lyman Beecher, an abolitionist. This, I suppose, is just what the Beechers wanted once they figured out which way the wind was blowing. Until then, however, Lyman (and the rest of the family) really did temporize on the issue of slavery, remaining colonizationists until rather late in the day. Kazin also misreads the debate over excluding slaveholders from the Lord's Supper, finding it rather beside the point; ironically, given Kazin's own moralism, contemporaries saw the exclusion of slaveholders as a radical position that condemned slavery too fiercely.

As a final aside, and at the risk of sounding gratuitously unkind, I feel obliged to warn potential readers that the book could have used another draft or two before publication—or at least a good editing by a sympathetic hand. It is sometimes difficult to understand what Kazin intends to say; some sentences scan well enough but, on reflection, don't have any real meaning; other sentences run on breathlessly. Favorite incidents, phrases, and quotations are repeated seemingly unnoticed. I find it increasingly troubling that today's economics of publishing—if that is the culprit—are such that an eminent writer with a long-standing reputation is left to such treatment.

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Notebook

From history to Hollywood: the voyage of "La Amistad"

by Robert L. Paquette

In 1839, fifty-three enslaved Africans aboard the Cuban schooner *La Amistad*, coasting eastward from Havana toward a village port in north-central Cuba, took advantage of a summer night and a small, sleepy crew to rise in revolt. One of the young men, named Cinqué, a Mende-speaker from a region near the Windward Coast of West Africa, led the uprising by killing the ship's cook and captain. Several crewmen met the same fate, although José Ruiz and Pedro Montes, the Cuban middlemen who had purchased the Africans in Havana, were spared to navigate the rebels back to their homeland. Instead, the clever Cubans tacked indifferently to the east by day and earnestly to the northwest by night, ending up weeks later, with the increasingly desperate mutineers dehydrated and diminished in number, off the coast of Long Island. There the U.S. Coast Guard spotted the wounded vessel and seized it and the rebels, including Cinqué and a handful of others who had rowed ashore looking for water.

In tow, *La Amistad* arrived in New London, Connecticut, to await salvage proceedings. The authorities placed the Africans in custody, but their plight sparked a much more complicated legal wrangle as a network of Northern abolitionists rallied to their support. They hired lawyers knowing full well that challenging in court the competing claims of the Coast Guard officers, the Spanish Crown, Ruiz and Montes, and the administration of President Martin Van Buren would gain considerable publicity for their antislavery cause. The whole affair heightened sectional tensions in the United States and unsettled diplomatic relations between Spain, the United States, and Great Britain. The case eventually reached the U.S. Supreme Court where former president John Quincy Adams took the floor for the first time in thirty years to defend the Africans. The ruling in 1841 freed thirty-six survivors to return home.

Had Steven Spielberg and his DreamWorks lieutenants limited their claims about the movie *Amistad* to historical accuracy in the broad strokes only, they might have evoked a more generous response from professional historians. The movie falls far short of high cinematic art, but the producers, as creative artists, have the freedom to take history and reshape it into whatever fictional drama they see fit. Yet Spielberg and the DreamWorks crew, even before *Amistad*'s December premiere, pronounced their film to be a kind of superior history. They distributed "Dear Educator" learning kits for classroom use in which the movie would serve, among other things, to stimulate "critical thinking about the value of history in light of the long-faded chapter [now] restored to American history in the film." Students learn, for example, that the producers "took great care to make every detail of this historical drama authentic," and that both "historical drama and histori-

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cal scholarship aim to portray the truth about the past."

Quotations from Spielberg and co-producer Debbie Allen stand out in this publication like epigraphs from Jefferson and Lincoln. After watching the movie, students are asked "to react" to Allen's gendered wisdom that "the real history has just been castrated—left out—and great historians have done it. It's beyond racism, I think. It's just one culture wanting to be dominant, and not really acknowledging the contributions of a culture that was far beyond and centuries ahead." Beyond and ahead of what, the learning kit does not say.

Allen's breezy indictment of previous studies and unnamed historians seems incredible given the scholars credited with advising the project: John Hope Franklin; Henry Louis Gates, Jr.; Arthur Abraham, a historian of Sierra Leone and Mende culture; Howard Jones, author of the best historical monograph on the *Amistad* affair; and Clifton Johnson, founder and executive director of the Amistad Research Center in New Orleans, and others. One wonders whether any of these gentlemen ventured from the sidelines to engage the DreamWorks producers in a serious conversation about the practice of history and the state of the profession, for, if the truth be known, probably no field of history in the United States during the last quarter-century has generated a more impressive body of scholarship than has the study of slavery.

Slavery citations alone, compiled from a global perspective, now fill voluminous specialized bibliographies to which the specialized journal *Slavery & Abolition* publishes annual supplements. The movie exaggerates the impact of the *Amistad* case on the ending of slavery in the United States and on the course of the South to secession, but historians can hardly be said to have ignored the event. The movie script itself derives from William Owens's popular history of the revolt, first published in 1953 and reprinted in 1968. Since Owens's work, more than a dozen scholarly essays, books, and reprints of published antebellum documents on the *Amistad* have appeared. At various times, state and local historical organizations in Connecticut have initiated educational programs to keep the memory alive. In 1970 black scholars retold the story in introducing a journal of history and culture called *Amistad*, featuring writings by such luminaries as C. L. R. James, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Toni Morrison. Most notably, the Amistad Research Center has grown since its founding in 1966 into a prominent archival repository on African-American history with millions of manuscript items and thousands of related books and reels of microfilm accessible to professional and amateur historians alike. The darkness in education to which Debbie Allen alludes has other causes and conceals far more weighty issues than the *Amistad*. If students remained blind to the revolt until the coming of DreamWorks, it was in spite of historians, not because of them.

Predictably, with the stakes raised by Spielberg's alleged restoration of a lost chapter of history, historians have pounced from all directions on the historical accuracy of the film. Nor have Spielberg's liberal bona fides spared him a pummeling from the Left. Eric Foner in an Op-Ed piece for *The New York Times* went so far as to declare the movie "not appropriate for use in the classroom." Jesse Lemisch, former apostle among the dissenting historians of the New Left, called *Amistad* "conservative trash," a "screed for white paternalism and black mysticism." Spielberg's conspicuously present-minded movie, it seems, failed to rise to Lemisch's standard of usable history in that the film glorified the agency of white lawyers at the expense of the black rebels.

The producers boast of their attention to every historical detail, yet several of the movie's key characters never existed in history, and those who did have only a faint ring of authenticity. The portrayals of ten-year-old Queen Isabella II and Spanish officials look as though they were drawn from childhood memories of the "Zorro" television series. African-American historians

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have joined Foner in complaining about the creation of a fictional Theodore Joadson (Morgan Freeman) when historical black abolitionists such as the Reverend James W. C. Pennington, educator and missionary, actually participated in the *Amistad* affair. According to the movie, President Van Buren (Nigel Hawthorne), realizing that the case at the lower court is turning against the interests of his Southern supporters whom he needs to win reelection, replaces Judge Andrew T. Judson, a principled old puffball, with a younger, more ambitious Democratic partisan, Judge Coglin (Jeremy Northam). Yet Coglin is an invention. In truth, Judge Judson, a Democratic party man and anti-abolitionist, relied on testimony from the famous Irish abolitionist Richard Robert Madden (not mentioned in the movie) to rule on the status of the Africans. Madden, a former British official in Cuba, offered crucial information on the operation of Cuba's massive contraband slave trade in blatant violation of an Anglo-Spanish treaty of 1817. Whatever his prejudices against blacks and abolitionists, Judson ruled on the evidence at the level of a Federal district court that the rebels were free Africans kidnapped and illegally sold as slaves in Cuba.

In *Amistad*, President Van Buren stands in sharp contrast to his historical counterpart whose political acumen earned him the nickname "the Little Magician." The movie portrays him as a rather dull, manipulable careerist. He rides campaign trains, kisses babies, and preens on the stump. His middle-aged, beefy jowls and full-arm gestures take on Nixonesque dimensions. John Calhoun (Arliss Howard) strides into a White House dinner, svelte and dapper, looking remarkably fresh for a man who was actually approaching sixty at the time. He explicates Southern distinctiveness and the intertwining of the master and slave in the antebellum South. Yet he leaves his table companions—and the audience—with the grossly misleading notion that the weight of the *Amistad* case was such that a decision unfavorable to the South risked civil war.

Mende spirituality soars with New Age appeal in the movie; evangelical Protestantism, however, a vital transatlantic source of the antislavery movement, inhabits a dour and sanctimonious brood. During one scene, Lewis Tappan (Stellan Skarsgard) lapses in front of Joadson (the embodiment of a progressive conscience) into thinking about how the antislavery crusade could reap greater rewards from the Africans' martyrdom than from their successful defense in court. Tappan then condescends to the black abolitionist after receiving his stinging rebuke. Dead Africans, however, could not have accomplished the expressed goal of the historical Tappan to return them to Africa as free Christian converts to spread the gospel. The historical Tappan cared for, educated, and defended them at a staggering cost to his business and family life, even sacrificing bedside time with a dying daughter to carry on the struggle. Without Tappan, the *Amistad* Africans could not have returned to Africa in 1841 and might not have returned at all.

Roger Sherman Baldwin (Matthew McConaughey) and John Quincy Adams (Anthony Hopkins) seem scripted to resonate with campus crowds. In the film, Adams dodders about, lecturing high-mindedly as he goes, like some Ivy League eccentric. Baldwin, a kind of brashly intelligent yet untidy graduate student, recruits Adams to help him defend the noble Africans before the Supreme Court. Cinqué (Djimon Hounsou), in a face-to-face meeting with Adams for which there is no historical evidence, inspires the direction of the defense by getting Adams to think like a Mende about his own father and the other ancestors of the founding. Like Aphra Behn (in *Oroonoko*) and Victor Hugo (in *Bug-Jargal*) long before him, Spielberg, a stand-in European, directs his audience to a noble African.

The historical Baldwin was actually forty-six years old and an established lawyer with antislavery credentials when he became the Africans' principal attorney. A graduate of Yale College at the age of eighteen and the grandson of one of the framers of the Con-

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stitution, Baldwin ranked in 1839 as one of the outstanding legal minds in Connecticut. Contemporaries describe him as tall and fastidious, noted, in particular, for wearing tailored black suits. John Quincy Adams was in his seventies during the *Amistad* case, but it is doubtful whether the movie version had the stamina to match the historical Adams who performed before the court to a packed house for about eight hours over two days. Adams did stop at one point to turn eyes to two copies of the Declaration of Independence hanging on the wall and declared that its principles of inalienable human rights were incompatible with slavery. In the movie, the Adams character essentially repeats these lines.

But the real Adams knew better than to base his defense to a predominantly Southern Supreme Court on the abstract phrases of the Declaration. His sprawling argument, which legal scholars regard as inferior to that of Baldwin, labored through the history of the case, the actions taken by the Van Buren administration, and the fine points of international treaties. Justice Joseph Story rendered a narrow decision that made no sweeping assertions about the inalienable rights of man. Indeed, had the evidence proved that the *Amistad* rebels were Cuban-born slaves, the Court would almost certainly have ordered their return to the island where the adult males would have faced sure execution.

Perhaps the most riveting scenes in the movie depict the slave trade. In the beginning, Cinqué, caked with dirt and sweating profusely in the stinking, blackened hold of the *Amistad* applies bleeding fingers to extricate himself from his shackles. He and his liberated mates crack into a box of sugarcane knives, then hack their way to victory. In a fierce struggle with the captain, Cinqué explodes into a primal rage that allows him to overcome the captain by running him through the chest with his own sword. The camera lingers on a triumphant Cinqué, of formidable physique and stature, towering over the body. For the sake of historical accuracy, Spielberg might have dwelled on the prime target of Cinqué's rage, the *Amistad*'s mulatto cook, but his death might have thrown a disturbing nuance into a simpler conversation about race relations.

More than midway through the movie, Cinqué tells more of his story, how he arrived on the *Amistad* in the first place. ("Whoever tells the best story wins," says Adams.) Kidnapped by Africans, Cinqué is sold with other men, women, and children at the Lomboko slave fortress to a Portuguese trader. Chained and naked, slaves embark on the "notorious" slave ship *Tecora* in a frenzy of fear, panic, and brutality. One white crewman pops up to shoot a slave indiscriminately. Others beat and lash their human cargo until blood streams down the decks, all before the ship weighs anchor. Chains and black bodies pack the hold of the ship. Starving mouths lap up a starchy paste ladled into their hands. During the middle passage, one enslaved woman hugging her child to her breast flips herself overboard to escape her white tormenters. A provision crisis forces dozens of slaves to be thrown overboard. The survivors, once in Havana, are rudely rubbed down with palm oil in preparation for sale. A mixed crowd of prosperous Cuban ladies and gentlemen assembles to observe the spectacle of the auction block.

No honest scholar can deny the brutality and horror of the Atlantic slave trade. Slaves were horribly beaten and lashed during the middle passage. They suffered disease and malnutrition. Some committed suicide. Slaving captains, for various reasons, dispatched some to watery graves. *Amistad*'s producers, however, strayed beyond the bounds of the historical evidence on the voyages of the *Tecora* and *Amistad* to confront the audience with a carefully selected medley of the horrific.

Henry Louis Gates, Jr., must have neglected to mention to the producers that at the W. E. B. Du Bois Institute at Harvard University a distinguished group of specialists have been working for years to compile a database on the Atlantic slave trade.

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At present, this team has gathered quantitative information on an estimated two-thirds of all known slaving voyages across the Atlantic. Their preliminary findings, along with previous scholarship, provide standards by which to judge the movie's depiction of the slave trade.

The notorious *Tecora* does not yet show up in the slave-trade database, and it may be that the word itself is a corruption by the African witnesses of another Portuguese name. By Lomboko, depicted in the movie as a masonry fortress, the Africans meant Dombokoro or Lombokoro, a stockaded compound built on mainland Sierra Leone by an infamous Spanish trader named Pedro Blanco. His stronghold contained several large holding depots or barracoons for slaves brought from the interior. Disease and British antislaving cruisers had prompted men such as Blanco to become more efficient in loading illegal slave ships quickly from one spot with full cargoes. The uplifting scene near the end of the movie when Captain Fitzgerald (Peter Firth) broadsides the fortress into oblivion seems taken from Commander Joseph Denman's destruction of Blanco's emporia in 1840, thus well before the *Amistad* case had reached the Supreme Court.

For one of their most gruesome scenes, the scriptwriters may have borrowed from the atypical result of the 1781 voyage of the British slave ship *Zong*, when depleting water stocks caused more than a hundred sick and dying slaves to be bound and tossed overboard. Had these and similar atrocities become the norm, the Atlantic slave trade might not have lasted a generation, much less four centuries. At the time of the *Amistad*, the average return on investment for individual traders involved in the contraband Cuban trade had risen to almost 20 percent. Because of the risks associated with British suppression policies, however, many big traders were going bankrupt. In making economic sense of the *Tecora* atrocities, District Attorney Holabird (Pete Postlethwaite) was heading in the right direction.

In reality, only a small proportion of enslaved Africans entered the Americas from the Windward Coast region either during the nineteenth century or during the entire history of the Atlantic slave trade. Of the 425,000 slaves imported from West Africa to the Americas from 1836 to 1840, little more than 1 percent came from the Windward Coast. Enslaved men formed a minority of those cargoes; almost 70 percent were women and children.

At less than 10 percent, the shipboard mortality rate for slaves imported from Sierra Leone from 1821 to 1867 ranks as one of the lowest in the history of the Atlantic slave trade. White crews who parked in the mosquito-infested waterways of those lands suffered higher casualties. Data show that adult slaves imported into Cuba from 1855 to 1859 averaged five feet two inches in height. Observers thought that the *Amistad* men averaged about five foot six with Cinqué a bit taller. The rebels of Spielberg's movie, even at the end of their debilitating voyages, look ready for the NFL draft. Their pallid white allies, by contrast, obviously needed a better diet and more exercise.

The movie's anachronisms mount to dizzying heights if focus is diverted to architecture, mannerisms, and language. But *Amistad* has less to do with historical reconstruction than future direction. Spielberg designed his movie to speak to the feelings and sensibilities of a multicultural Nineties audience. In what was intended to be a powerful scene, Cinqué and Adams, black and white, begin to find a common ground of understanding in Adams's greenhouse when Cinqué recognizes under a glass protector Adams's treasured African violet. With Adam's permission, Cinqué bends down and gently extends his hands with uplifted palms to inhale its scent. Like much else in this movie, the intended metaphor loses force when grounded in the history it purports to represent. The African violet originated in East not West Africa; no European harvested one for transplantation until the last decade of the nineteenth century; the flowers give off no scent.

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Letters

Wilhelm Reich

To the Editors:
Roger Kimball's article, "The Marriage of Marx & Freud" (December 1997), contains numerous distortions of Wilhelm Reich's observations, discoveries and ideas. Although it is impossible in this allotted space to respond to each of them, in order to respond at all, a brief review of Reich's work is necessary.

In the 1920s and early 1930s, Reich, a physician and a student and colleague of Freud, discovered that starting early in life the individual develops characteristic attitudes toward the world which to a greater or lesser degree serve an emotionally protective function. This character "armor," Reich observed, is always associated with chronic muscular rigidity (muscular armor). He also observed that the more rigid the character defenses, the more rigid the muscular defenses. Both hold back emotional sensation and expression and interfere with natural functioning. This natural functioning emerges when chronic armor is dissolved in the course of the treatment Reich developed for this purpose. (Few people develop and live without some significant armoring.) Individuals without significant armoring, however, are distinguished by certain characteristics: they are honest, decent, show a natural grace, are capable of aggression without sadism, work without inhibition or compulsion, and emotional expression appears and feels natural. Such individuals are examples of the *genital character*—they function in all aspects of their life on the most mature level of character development. In contrast are all the other pre-genital character types including the phallic-narcissist, obsessive-compulsive, etc.

Throughout his life and in his writings Reich emphasized the distinction between the primary, healthy instincts arising from the biological core of people and the secondary, sadistic and pornographic impulses which develop as natural drives are deflected by and try to break through the individual's chronic armoring. When Kimball quotes Reich that "establishing a 'satisfactory genital sex life' was the key not only to individual but also to societal liberation and happiness, . . ." he does so without including what Reich meant by "genital" and the essential distinction Reich made between unarmored heterosexual sexuality and its armored counterpart (the many forms of pre-genital sexual activity). Kimball also mentions Reich's concept of 'orgiastic [sic] potency.' Is this Kimball's misspelling? Is it a typographical error? Neither appears likely because "orgiastic" fits in so nicely with Kimball's portrayal of Reich as believing "*anything*," as supporting licentiousness, as "always obsessed with sex, . . . potty about it."

What Reich actually discovered is that the genital character is capable of *orgastic potency* during the sexual embrace: he or she is able to allow energy and sensation to flow freely into the genital without inhibition and to be completely discharged at the acme of the orgasm. Accompanied by a clouding of consciousness and convulsions of the entire body, the orgasm, in health, discharges energy and functions as the ultimate regulator of the individual's energy

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economy. Reich *never* advocated more and better orgasms as some have said. *His goal, through child rearing supportive of children's natural, healthy core needs, was the prevention of chronic armoring so that with succeeding generations natural, not armored, functioning would gradually govern life.* (This is not "permissiveness" or utopianism.) Contrary to Kimball's assertion, Reich knew from his own experience this could never come about through politics. Although a Marxist and a member of the German Communist Party in the 1930s, his interest and efforts focused on the mental and sexual hygiene of the masses. He established clinics and held public meetings to address practical problems of social living. These were hugely popular and outdrew political rallies organized by the Communists, to their dismay. Even in his most Marxist-laden manuscript, "Masses and State" (1935), circulated to select colleagues and warning them of dangerous, authoritarian developments in the Soviet Union, he identified the inner emotional helplessness of people as the significant cause of their social problems. As his understanding evolved he saw that the armored condition impairs people's capacity to be simultaneously free and responsible, that armored people long to be free, and that this longing renders them vulnerable to the "freedom peddler," the modern liberal or collectivist, and fascists on both sides of the political spectrum. Reich wrote in *The Murder of Christ* (1953): "The conservative, who, out of an instinctive knowledge of the great difficulties connected with the pursuit of truth, defends the *status quo* in social living, is by far more honest. He has, at least, a chance of remaining decent." This from Kimball's "demobbed [?] Communist."

As for Kimball's assertion that Reich's discovery of a cosmic energy, orgone energy, was "nonsense" and fraudulent, not only has *serious* scientific investigation replicated Reich's work, but mainstream science is also knocking at the door. One example is quantum physics and chemistry. Another is the work of S. K. Lamoreaux validating the existence of the Casimir force and a *mass-free cosmic energy* described in Philip Yam's article, "Exploiting Zero-Point Energy" in *Scientific American* (December 1997).

Furthermore, despite Kimball's distorted contention to the contrary, Reich never claimed to have discovered a cure for cancer. In the preface to *The Cancer Biopathy* (1948) Reich wrote, "I do not publish this book without a great deal of concern. The core of this concern is the expectation of so many readers of our literature that now a cure-all for cancer has been found. This I must strictly refute." This, however, did not stop the FDA in 1956 from *burning* more than fifteen tons of Reich's books and journals as "labelling" for the orgone accumulator. Included for incineration were such titles as *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*; *Ether, God and Devil*; *The Cancer Biopathy*; *The Orgone Energy Bulletin*; and other orgonomic medical and scientific journals.

How is it possible that Reich's hard-won natural scientific understanding of the biological, sociological, and characterological basis of the "human condition" ended up in ashes or that he and his work continue to be smeared with distortion?

Kimball and others who rightfully decry the social decay threatening to destroy us owe it to themselves and their readership to get Reich right—not through "experts" and "critics" who have no working connection with orgonomic knowledge, not through "true-believers" and those who refer to themselves as "Reichians" who may in fact be mystical and cultlike in their views and "understanding" of Reich's work, and certainly not through those on the Right and Left who condemn or appropriate distorted parts of Reich's work to serve their own ends.

As Dr. Elsworth Baker, the physician entrusted by Reich with the future of orgonomy, wrote in the preface to his book *Man in the Trap* (1967): "Only the most 'hideous distortions' of orgonomic truth—as Reich put it—could possibly equate his work, thinking, and hopes for mankind with those of present-day liberals, leftists, and beatnik-bohemians who have in one way or another attempted to identify themselves with orgonomy." I trust that in this brief letter I have shown the truth in these words.

Howard J. Chavis, M.D.
Associate Editor
Journal of Orgonomy

Roger Kimball replies:
I think that Dr. Chavis's letter speaks for itself.

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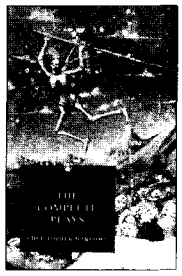

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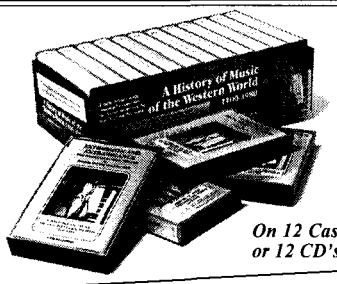

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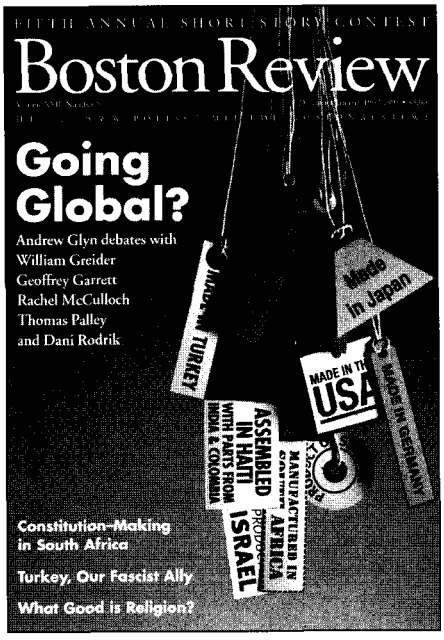

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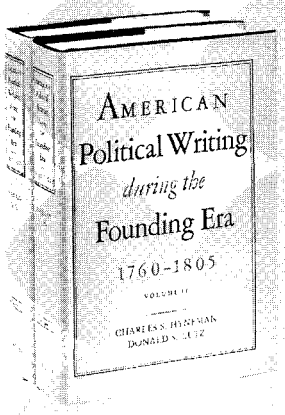

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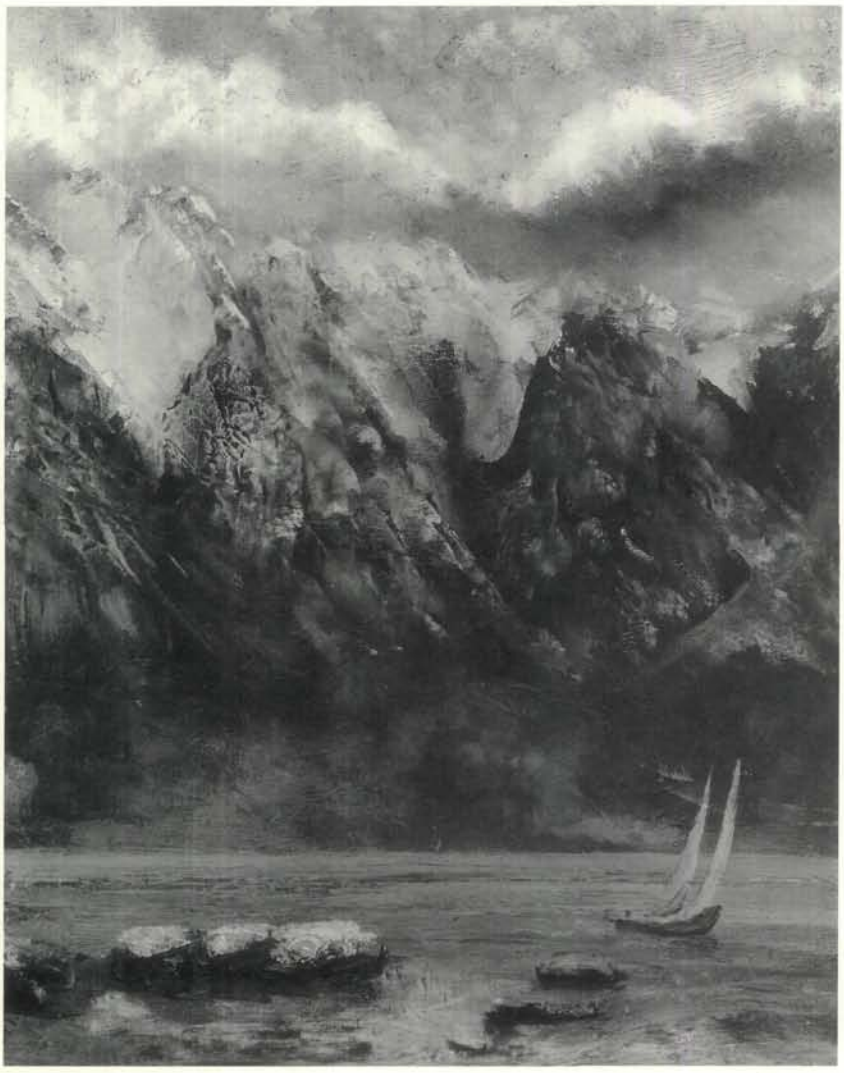

Gustave Courbet

(1819-1877)
Le Lac Leman et le Pic Grammont, 1875
oil on canvas
18⅛ x 14 1/16 in.
46.4 x 38 cm.
Signed lower left: *G. Courbet*
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